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ABSTRACT

This reference guide was created for district leaders and teams who are preparing for or engaging in planning for continuous improvement. It combines basic information about continuous-improvement planning with questions, examples, activities, and worksheets that can enrich planning by helping participants explore ideas, analyze data, and make decisions. It draws upon a number of external sources, as well as from some of the Ohio Department of Education's previous publications. It also makes use of what has been learned from visiting and interacting with educators in school districts across Ohio. Its purpose is to help school districts produce formal written plans that can become the basis for making effective planning an integral part of how they approach needs, problems, and opportunities. The guide is based on the assumption that a well-designed plan is the framework for a continuous process of gathering data, evaluating results, and making necessary changes. (Contains 13 references.) (DFR)

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Reference Guide

Continuous Improvement Planning

for School Districts

EA 030749

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Reference Guide
to Continuous Improvement Planning
for Ohio School Districts

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Continuous Improvement—
A Way of Life

Imagine a school district that gets better year after year—where everyone is constantly finding innovative ways to reach students, solve problems, maximize resources, make day-to-day processes more efficient, and work as a community. Such a district—where continuous improvement is a way of life—would achieve extraordinary gains in student performance.

Districts fully committed to high performance do not view continuous improvement as a process that occurs *in addition to* what they do. Rather, continuous improvement *is what they do.* A focus on continuous improvement is evident in the actions of every individual, team, and organization:

- Students, teachers, administrators, school board members, students' family members, local business and industry groups, and community members share a common vision and common goals that are focused on student success. Everyone is actively involved in achieving the goals.
- Everyone collaborates to ensure that the learning environment is safe and healthy, that the curriculum is well-integrated and relevant, that a variety of student-focused instructional strategies and learning activities are used, that students' needs for services are met, and that students' performance is assessed in meaningful ways.
- Everyone is encouraged to identify problems and find innovative solutions.
- Everyone systematically gathers data on the progress being made toward goals. Improvement can always be verified because progress is measured against clear, objective indicators.
- Everyone participates in teams, communicates openly, and collaborates daily. Everyone is continually learning.
- Everyone is involved in decision-making. Consensus is valued. Opportunities for leadership are abundant.
- Resources, policies, and organizational structures all support continuous improvement.

A system with these characteristics does not happen without planning. The *Reference Guide to Continuous Improvement Planning for Ohio School Districts* is designed to help Ohio school districts employ the continuous planning that is an essential element of continuous improvement.

About This Reference Guide

Reference Guide to Continuous Improvement Planning for Ohio School Districts was created for district leaders and teams who are preparing for or engaging in continuous improvement planning.

It combines basic information about continuous improvement planning with questions, examples, activities, and worksheets that can enrich planning by helping participants explore ideas, analyze data, and make decisions. It draws upon a number of external sources, as well as from some of the Ohio Department of Education's previous publications. It also makes use of what has been learned from visiting and interacting with educators in school districts across Ohio.

The purpose of this guide is to help school districts produce formal, written plans *that can become the basis for making effective planning an integral part of how they approach needs, problems, and opportunities.* The guide is based on the assumption that a well-designed plan is the framework for a continuous process of gathering data, evaluating results, and making necessary changes.

The Ohio Department of Education does not intend for this publication to be viewed as a set of rules and regulations, nor should it be considered a step-by-step procedure. Rather, it is a collection of general guidelines, tips, and techniques that can help continuous improvement planning teams generate ideas, avoid obstacles, and save time as they address their own unique planning situations.

Planning teams are encouraged to read other sources, seek expert advice, draw upon previous experiences, and design their own approaches in combination with the knowledge in this book.

Using This Reference Guide

For the sake of simplicity, the process outlined in this reference guide is presented in a linear, step-by-step format. However, continuous improvement planning is not a finite activity, and it seldom follows a straight line. Most districts will discover the need to revisit earlier sections as they refine their thinking and continue to collect and interpret data. As they evaluate their progress and revise their plans each year, they may repeat key planning activities that were useful in developing their initial plans.

Districts that already have completed continuous improvement plans or strategic plans can use this reference guide to evaluate their plans and analyze any implementation problems they may be having.

Districts that have not yet engaged in significant continuous improvement planning or strategic planning can use this reference guide as an aid for mapping out the planning process, as a reference in setting the agenda for each planning session, as a source of ideas for facilitators, and as a workbook where team members record their ideas. Also, information and worksheets can be duplicated and distributed to stakeholders as a way to collect their input.

District administrators may want to read "Part I: Preparation for Continuous Improvement" before selecting planning team members. In previewing the material, they may want to think about what parts of the process will be the most difficult so they can plan any needed training, research, or consulting services.

School district personnel throughout Ohio have helped to shape this edition of the *Reference Guide to Continuous Improvement Planning for Ohio School Districts*. Additional comments and ideas for improving future editions are welcome.

"Finding new ways to improve is not a condemnation of the past or present, but a statement that every individual and organization is a living entity that can better itself."

John R. Dew, Ed.D.

Some Key Terms

School District: In this guide, the term school district refers to individuals and organizations that play a role in the education of students who live in a specific local area.

Stakeholder: A stakeholder is anyone who affects or is affected by the success of a school district. Typical stakeholder groups include students, teachers, school administrators, students' family members, school board members, community leaders, local business and industry, and citizens who live in the community.

An Effective Continuous Improvement Plan

In Ohio, a continuous improvement plan is a document used to guide educators, students and their families, business people, and community members in the process of achieving and measuring substantial improvements in a school district's performance.

Each continuous improvement plan is unique because it reflects the individuals and groups who are stakeholders in a school district's success. However, effective continuous improvement plans share certain characteristics:

- An effective continuous improvement plan is a commitment to collaboration and shared decision-making. It connects individual schools with each other and with their surrounding communities.
- An effective continuous improvement plan is visionary. It answers the question: *what do we want for ourstudents?*
- An effective continuous improvement plan is strategic. It answers the question: *where do we want our schools to be in 3-7 years and how will we get there?* It enhances the abilities of school districts to obtain funding, to form partnerships, and to remain at the forefront of quality and innovation.
- An effective continuous improvement plan is a living and dynamic document. Members of a learning community use it continually to guide their actions and make decisions. Also, they review and revise its content as they gain new insights about high performance. No continuous improvement plan is ever truly completed because planning is an ongoing activity.

Reflection

Robert Evans defines two types of change that occur in schools:

"First-order changes try to improve the efficiency or effectiveness of what we are already doing . . . .

Second-order changes are systemic in nature and aim to modify the very way an organization is put together, altering its assumptions, goals, structures, roles, and norms."

This distinction is good to keep in mind as the planning process unfolds.

Robert Evans, The Human Side of School Change

Some Key Terms

Improved Student Performance: In this guide, "improving student performance" for a school district means:

1) continually increasing the percentage of students who know, understand, and can do what is necessary to meet or exceed rigorous academic requirements that the school district and community have set.

2) continually increasing the percentage of graduates who are meeting or exceeding the requirements of higher education, employment, and productive citizenship.

Results Improvements

Student performance

Process Improvements

Teaching and learning

Assessment

Professional development

Student services

Use of facilities/ environments

Organization, governance, and resource leveraging

Family, business, and community involvement

What are the Contents and Focus of a District Continuous Improvement Plan?

A comprehensive district continuous improvement plan should address any aspects of the school district's structure and operations that significantly influence the academic success of students.

Plans must maintain a consistent focus on desired *student results*. Every decision presented in a continuous improvement plan must result, directly or indirectly, in ***improved student performance***.

Continuous improvement plans not only must communicate desired student results but also must outline strategies for improving the key ***processes*** that are carried out in a school district. The Ohio Department of Education has identified seven major processes that often require improvement before better student results can be achieved:

Teaching and Learning. Improving decisions about what is taught and how it is taught.

Assessment. Improving how student performance is measured.

Professional Development. Improving how educators contribute to continued improvement in student performance by acquiring new knowledge and skills, solving problems, improving their practice, and working together.

Student Services. Improving how students are assisted in maximizing their assets and overcoming obstacles that prevent academic success.

Use of Facilities/Environments. Improving how technology, other learning tools, and the functions and arrangements of buildings, classrooms, facilities, and grounds are used to enhance learning.

Organization, Governance, and Resource Leveraging. Improving how communications, problem-solving, sharing of responsibilities, policies, decision-making, resource management, scheduling, and other aspects of a school district's internal operations contribute to better student performance.

Family, Business, and Community Involvement. Improving how extensively and how effectively educators, parents and other family members, business and industry groups, and community members work together to improve student performance.

An Effective Planning Process

The continuous improvement planning process is an organized cycle of data collection, analysis, decision-making, and evaluation activities. Districts that engage fully in the process will identify the needs and strengths that are contributing to their current performance, establish priorities for improvement, set improvement goals and performance results indicators, determine corrective actions or strategies for meeting their goals, allocate and reallocate resources, assign specific responsibilities, and establish timelines.

An effective process is the key to an effective plan. In fact, the planning process should not be viewed as getting ready for future changes but rather as the first step in a continuing cycle of improvement—a process that continues as long as there are needs to be met.

No perfect recipe for successful planning exists because every school district has different ideas, different problems, and, most of all, different people. However, districts that have created and implemented successful plans often share certain characteristics:

1) Planning is a community-wide priority and is considered critical to future success.

2) Stakeholders throughout the district are aware, interested, represented, and involved in the process. Planners pay close attention to communicating progress and listening to suggestions. They work to ensure staff and community ownership of the plan. Often "critical friends" are called upon for objective comments and suggestions.

3) Data are used to identify strengths and weaknesses and to make strategic decisions. The decisions presented in the continuous improvement plan will be the framework for decision-making after the plan is implemented.

4) Planning is continuous and systematic. Skilled facilitators ensure that planning sessions produce results and end with a common understanding.

5) Time, effort, and resources are committed to achieving specific results by specific dates.

6) District-level planning is complemented by concurrent building-level planning. Building-level and district-level teams work to align their plans.

7) The plan is not viewed as a goal in itself. It is viewed and continually used as a tool for achieving high performance.

Question

Is continuous improvement planning the same thing as strategic planning?

Continuous improvement planning can be considered a form of strategic planning. Like the traditional strategic plan, which has its roots in the business world, a continuous improvement plan is intended to help a district determine where it wants and needs to be in the future and how it will get there.

The intent in distinguishing continuous improvement planning from strategic planning is to recognize that the environment in which schools operate is different from the business environment.

The word "continuous" tells the story. Improvement in school districts is an ongoing cycle of collecting and analyzing data to determine needs, making decisions based on those needs, measuring results as the decisions are implemented, and making better decisions as a result of those measurements.

Districts with strategic plans that are based on data and that have involved all stakeholders should consider these plans the basis for continuous improvement planning.

An Overview of the Process

This reference guide divides the continuous improvement planning process into four major stages: preparation, analysis, strategic decision-making, and implementation.

The flowchart on the opposite page presents the major activities in the continuous improvement planning process beginning with the analysis stage. Although the process is pictured in a linear format, the boundaries between activities are artificial. Planning teams will continue to analyze data and determine needs and strengths throughout development and implementation of the plan. Data collected during implementation may require teams to revisit goal setting or strategy development. In addition, districts may implement some strategies as pilots or demonstrations before the implementation stage begins.

Preparation

A district that adopts continuous improvement as a way of life should prepare for a challenging task. The district's leaders should examine their commitment to the process, agree on how planning will proceed, and select a group of interested, motivated people from various stakeholder groups to serve as the core planning team. The team should get acquainted, select leaders, identify the skills they need and the skills they can contribute, map out the planning process, and develop a plan for communicating with stakeholders.

At this point, the planning team members will examine their beliefs about student performance and the processes of education, as well as reviewing the local school board's vision and mission for the district. If a district vision and mission do not yet exist, the team will work with the board to begin defining a vision of the school district as it will be when high performance is achieved and a mission statement that reflects what stakeholders believe about the purpose of the school district. The vision may evolve further in later stages of the planning process.

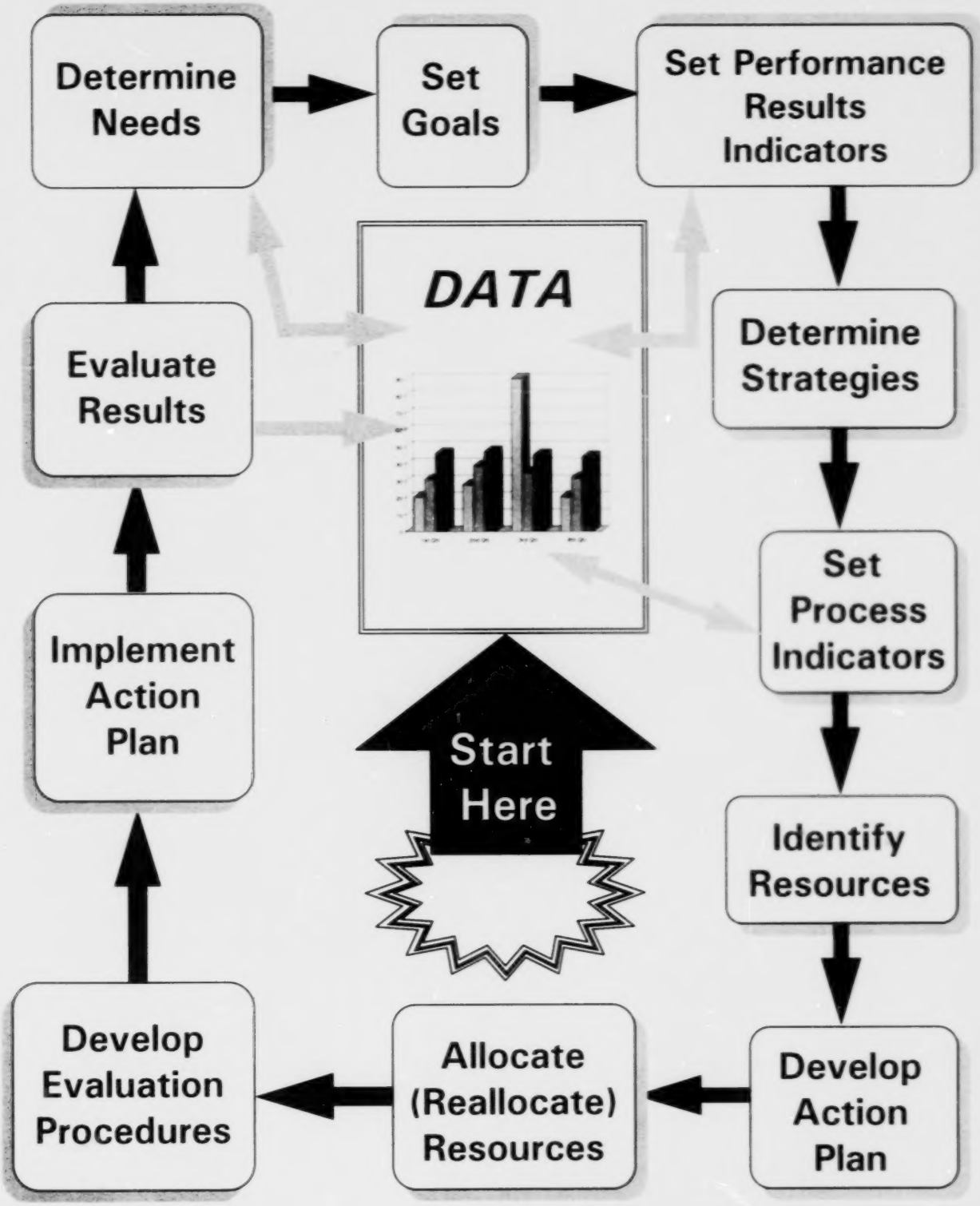
Analysis

The analysis stage is the time for assessing the district's current situation. As the flow chart shows, major steps include:

Collect and analyze data. Every decision presented in a continuous improvement plan must be based on data describing the performance of the school district. Therefore, planners begin by identifying existing data that are likely to be relevant to improvement planning and collecting new data that are essential to the planning process. As the flowchart shows, data collection and analysis occur throughout the process: as part of determining needs, again when setting indicators, and throughout implementation as results are continually evaluated.

Determine needs and strengths. Using existing and newly collected data, the planning team works with stakeholders to determine and prioritize the problems and issues the district needs to address, as well as the most important strengths it needs to protect and maximize.

Continuous Improvement Planning



Strategic Decision-making

The strategic decision-making stage—actually a cycle that will continue as long as improvements are needed—begins with the big picture and then grows increasingly specific and focused. As the flowchart on page 7 shows, major steps include:

Set goals. Working with stakeholders, the planning team sets goals to define what major improvements must be achieved in 3-7 years. Together, goals provide a concise description of how the district will accomplish its mission, realize its vision, maximize its strengths, and meet its needs.

Set performance results indicators. The planning team develops performance results indicators to describe in specific, measurable terms how the district will know it is achieving its goals. They also identify data sources and data-gathering methods for each indicator.

Determine strategies. Working with key stakeholders, the planning team creates strategies to describe how the school district will use its resources to accomplish its goals. To help them assess whether strategies are being implemented efficiently and effectively, the team can ***set process indicators*** that describe successful implementation of strategies in specific, measurable terms. As strategies are developed, the planning team also will ***identify resources*** that are available for use in carrying out the strategies.

Develop an action plan. For each strategy, the planning team works with key individuals in the district to describe in detail the specific actions needed to implement each strategy, to develop timelines, and to analyze costs. They must then ***allocate (or reallocate) resources*** to ensure that the plan can be implemented and ***develop evaluation procedures*** to help determine in the future whether the plan is succeeding or in need of revision.

Implementation

When all initial strategic decisions are made, the plan is written, adopted, and implemented. At this point, the district begins to put its decisions and solutions into practice. As the flowchart shows, implementation activities fall into two categories:

Implement the action plan. With resources in place, the entire school district begins to carry out the action plan. Building-level plans may be started at this point, or they may already be under way. The day-to-day process of implementing the action plan means that the district is continuously carrying out its strategies, and, if the strategies are effective, advancing toward the goals outlined in the comprehensive continuous improvement plan.

Evaluate the plan and the results. To determine whether the strategies and action plan are being implemented effectively, everyone in the district uses process indicators. To determine the effectiveness of the strategies themselves, the planning team and others periodically measure performance using performance results indicators. Based on those measurements, they revise the plan as needed. New needs and strengths may require new goals, indicators and strategies. Failure to meet performance results indicators may require adjusting strategies and action plans. Success in meeting performance results indicators may require setting new, more challenging goals.

Part I

Preparation for Continuous Improvement

A new view of leadership, new approaches to decision-making, and new relationships among stakeholders must begin to emerge early in the continuous improvement planning process. Effective preparation for continuous improvement helps district leaders and the planning team ensure that these first steps toward improvement occur.

The district's leaders must prepare for their role as change agents and select a planning team. Together, the planning team and the district's leaders must make important decisions about how the planning process will be conducted.

As the final step in the preparation phase, the planning team, usually in partnership with the school board, will begin a dialogue among stakeholders about the district's vision and mission.

After following the recommendations in this section, districts will have:

- Leaders who know more about supporting the planning team and the continuous improvement process
- A district planning team that represents all stakeholders
- Planning team members who know their purpose and are ready to proceed in an organized way
- A schedule that maps out the district planning process and specifies when and how the process will link to building-level planning
- A better understanding of the district's shared beliefs about learning and achievement
- An emerging vision and mission that will become richer as the process continues.

Explore Leadership

Potentially, continuous improvement planning can mean dramatic–and stressful–changes in any or all of the school district's familiar roles and routines. It will mean looking at each other in new ways, confronting problems that have remained beneath the surface for years, and making decisions that will affect the lives of everyone in the district. For these reasons, strong leadership will be needed.

"The greatest inhibitor to enlisting others in a common vision is lack of personal conviction. There is absolutely no way that you can, over the long term, convince others to share a dream if you are not convinced of it yourself."

J.M. Kouzes and B.Z. Posner, The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations

Some Key Terms

Leader: In this guide, a leader is a person who has broad responsibility for educational quality in a school district. The term "leader" can be applied to anyone who makes decisions that affect student learning district-wide, including district superintendents or other district-level administrators, presidents of local school boards or other decision-making bodies in the community, building principals, union presidents, and local legislators. Heads of parent and business organizations also may be considered leaders and should have increased leadership opportunities.

Leadership Team: In this guide, it is assumed that the composition of the leadership team will vary in different communities.

Continuous improvement planning poses a true leadership challenge for district superintendents, school board members, principals, and other decision-makers. They must champion the process and play an active role, but they also must ensure that stakeholders "own" the process.

Some of the challenges leaders face in continuous improvement planning are:

- Learning to share their personal visions for the district. Sending the message that they believe in the need for continuous improvement and strongly support the planning process.
- Committing time and energy to continuous improvement planning throughout the entire process.
- Remaining visibly involved when major planning activities are conducted and always being prepared to answer questions and make informed decisions.
- Communicating openly about the direction the district is taking, showing a willingness to listen, and soliciting ideas from stakeholders.
- Reflecting the direction the planning team is taking when making decisions, communicating, and going about their daily role. Discussing concerns openly.

Facing these challenges requires self-assessment and dialogue before planning begins. It is also important for the district's leaders to discuss their views about why continuous improvement planning is being undertaken and what role they wish to play in the process. *Note: One or more members of the leadership team may want to start keeping a journal that chronicles the continuous improvement process from the beginning.*

Dialogue Activity for District Leaders:

Clarifying the Leadership Challenge

Following are some questions that you, as members of the district's leadership team, can use to stimulate a dialogue about the challenges you face. Write your thoughts in your journal or on a sheet of paper. Use the lines provided below to write down key ideas that surface in the group discussion.

Change

How much change will be required for the district to reach a high level of performance? Are we prepared for second-order change? *(See page 3 for a definition of second order change.)* How much change will various groups in the district tolerate all at once? When can we expect to see significant change?

Commitment

How do you, as a leader, see yourself participating in the change process? What do other members of the leadership team say about their levels of participation? Should the district select a core group of leaders to "champion" the planning process, serve as active planning team members, and oversee administrative support for the process? Should administrative duties be redistributed so some members of the leadership team can devote more time to the process?

Leadership

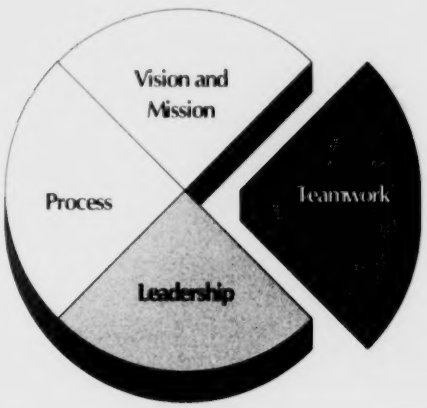
How do you lead? What are some examples of effective leadership you have observed? What external and internal forces help and hinder leadership in your district? How should you change your role to enhance the continuous improvement planning process? What will the planning team and stakeholders expect from you as a leader?

Supports

Would the planning process be enhanced by any immediate changes in the district's structure and operations? By immediate changes in roles, relationships, policies, communication mechanisms, and incentives? What else can leaders do to ensure successful planning?

Select the Planning Team

A district planning team should provide an effective blend of knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Representatives from all major stakeholder groups should come together as a unified team that is dedicated to district-wide change. Ideally, a district-wide team will maintain two-way communications with improvement planning teams in each building. In selecting building-level teams, each school also should represent its stakeholders.



Process Tip

How Leaders Can Aid the Planning Team

Make planning a district priority

Begin to expect high performance from all

Share your excitement and vision

Be a sounding board

Be neutral until others have voiced their opinions

Ask thought-provoking questions

Provide needed staff support, resources, and time

Hold the team accountable for meeting their agenda

Recognize the team for their hard work

District leaders may recruit the members of the planning team themselves, select them from a pool of volunteers, or allow buildings and units to select their own representatives.

The team should be small enough to enable efficient communication and coordination but large enough to represent the major stakeholder groups and areas of concern that exist in the district. Some planning experts believe that core planning teams should consist of no more than 20-25 people.

Creating a Representative Team

A district should ensure that the planning team includes representatives from its elementary, middle, high school, and vocational school communities. Representatives from Head Start programs and local preschools, as well as the district's special education programs, also should be represented. A representative from each building, or in large districts, from closely linked clusters of buildings, should be part of the team.

Both teachers and administrators must be well represented on the planning team. Since a district typically has more teachers than it has administrators, teachers should be the majority. If administrators outnumber teachers, it may be difficult for teachers to take ownership of the process. However, the number of administrators must be large enough to convey a sense that the plan is important to the district's leaders and will be implemented.

The district also should include representatives from other stakeholder groups: non-certified staff, students, students' family members, school board members, union representatives, and a cross-section of community leaders, business people, and citizens. Representatives from agencies that provide child-family services and other social services also can add value to the team.

Note: If district size, logistics, or other issues make it difficult for representatives from every building or stakeholder group to be part of the team, a district may decide to form a small core planning team that links to student, family, business, and community advisory teams or to teams in each building.

Diversity also is important. Males and females both should be well represented, and the team should reflect the district's generational, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic composition.

Creating a Well-Integrated Team

Representatives from existing teams also should be included in the planning process. If a Technology Plan or other important planning document has recently been completed or is underway, the continuous improvement planning team should connect to those efforts. Since professional development is certain to be addressed in the plan, members of the district's Local Professional Development Committee (LPDC) should be part of the planning team, and the two groups should align their efforts.

All team members must be committed to improvement, focused on student success, and skilled in teamwork. But team members also should be selected based on a combination of the strengths they would bring to the process. Some questions to ask in selecting team members are:

Who are the opinion leaders? Every building in the district, as well as every family, business, and community group, has at least one opinion leader. They are the people whose reactions to a new initiative often set the tone for how others will respond. They may have no formal authority but their knowledge, wisdom, and strength of personality give them great influence.

Who are the experts? Throughout the district are people who can bring valuable expertise to the process. District leaders may want to select those who have experience or training in continuous improvement planning. They may want to select someone who is familiar with the district's budget, state and federal funding sources, and decision-making processes. Knowledge and skill in statistics, evaluation, communication, or group facilitation also can be helpful.

Who are the doers? People with a record of achievement and success also would make valuable team members. Their initiative and self-motivation will keep the team moving forward, and their reputation for getting things done will inspire confidence among the district's stakeholders.

Who has valuable skills and perspectives to offer? District leaders should think about the mix of strengths needed to create a high performance team. They may select some members for their remarkable vision and creativity and others for their outstanding logic and ability to handle details. They may select some because of their ability to resolve conflicts, express ideas, or understand and relate to students and their families—and some because they represent opposing viewpoints that are sure to be expressed when the plan is adopted.

Reflection

Coordinating District and Building Planning Teams

Beginning the continuous improvement planning process at the district and building levels simultaneously may be complex during the initial stages, but it should be considered for a number of reasons:

- √ Staff, parents, and students in each building will feel a greater sense of ownership in the district planning process.
- √ The district plan will reflect more accurately the differing experiences and concerns of individual cultures.
- √ The pool of good ideas for the district plan will expand.
- √ Implementation will be smoother and more enthusiastic since buildings will be more familiar with the district vision, mission, and goals. Buildings may begin to use effective planning techniques and to pilot strategies earlier.

Team Selection Activity for District Leaders:

Stakeholder Analysis

This analysis will help determine who the district's stakeholders are and what their involvement should be in the planning process.

1. On the lines below, list groups who are considered stakeholders. (Remember, stakeholders affect and are affected by the district's success.)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. For each stakeholder group, answer the following questions:

   √ How do our schools affect them?

   √ How do they affect the schools?

   √ How can they benefit the planning process?

   √ How many members of this group should be on the planning team?

3. Decide upon a selection process:
   Will district leaders select and recruit team members? Will district leaders ask for volunteers? Or will each stakeholder group be asked to provide a specific number of representatives?

Self-Assessment Activity for Team Members:

Identifying Team Knowledge and Experience

This self-assessment can help you as a team member to identify your potential contributions to the team and determine your potential training needs. If you think you may be able to provide training to others on the team in a knowledge or skill area, place a * next to the item.

	Excellent	Adequate	I Need Help
Team-Building			
Interpersonal Communication			
Writing			
Meeting Management			
Facilitation			
Cross-Cultural Awareness			
Local Politics			
School Culture			
Continuous Improvement			
Project Management			
Resource Management			
Finance			
Computer Software			
Taking Meeting Minutes			
Public Relations/Marketing			
Creativity Techniques			
Critical Thinking Techniques			
Vision Creation			
Needs Assessment			
Data Collection and Analysis			
Indicators and Measurement			
Goal-setting			
Strategy Development			
Action Planning			
Other			

Design the Planning Process

A number of key decisions must be made in designing the district's continuous improvement planning initiative—how district-level and building-level teams will approach the process, what the timetable will be, and how the team will prepare for and conduct its work.

"Nothing new that is really interesting comes without collaboration."

James Watson, Nobel prize winner

Question

How can a district ensure that all stakeholders are involved?

It is never too early to begin sharing information about continuous improvement with building-level planning teams, as well as with all the district's stakeholders.

While the district planning team is preparing for the tasks ahead, district leaders may want to engage speakers or give seminars about quality improvement, data-based decision-making and other relevant topics.

Stakeholders will be better prepared to contribute to the plan, less likely to resist change, and more likely to feel a sense of ownership in the process.

Establishing a process for continuous improvement planning—in essence, planning the task of planning—will help the planning team members manage their time and make it easier for the district's stakeholders to follow progress and suggest ideas.

The school district's administrative team and planning team should design a process that they feel is appropriate given the circumstances and characteristics of the district. Once this process has been developed, it should be followed completely and consistently unless team members agree upon a compelling need to change it.

Developing Links Between Building and District Teams

District leaders and principals will need to decide how district-level planning and planning in the individual school buildings will be connected. For most districts, the best approach is to form a district-level planning team and teams in each school building during the same period of time. These district-level and building-level teams should communicate as they work through each successive stage of planning and strive to align their decisions.

Teams at both the building and district levels will need to design effective processes for coordinating activities, avoiding bottlenecks, and achieving consensus.

Developing the Planning Timetable

The planning team and district leaders also will need to decide when planning will begin and target a date for implementation.

Districts can expect to spend at least 6-9 months in developing their continuous improvement plans. Effective planning requires a great deal of data collection and analysis, brainstorming, and dialogue, as well as time to gather

suggestions and comments from stakeholders. Time also must be allocated for planning team members to attend training.

The following questions can help in scheduling the initial continuous improvement planning cycle:

- *Are district-level and building-level plans being created simultaneously?* If so, the schedule for producing a district-level plan should include time for aligning district and building-level planning.
- *Are there tight limits on the time available to planning team members? Will release time for school personnel be considered?* If planning time per week is unavoidably limited, a longer planning period is needed. However, district leaders and the planning team members should search for creative ways to find common planning time.
- *What is the schedule for the district's budgeting process?* It would be less effective to begin allocating resources to the strategies cited in the plan after the budget is already approved.
- *What grant application deadlines are pending?* The continuous improvement plan will be of great value in applying for federal and state funding. Districts may want to consider future grant application deadlines when deciding on a completion date.
- *Are there any upcoming events in the district that would be barriers or aids to the planning process?* If the arrival of a new superintendent, a major levy campaign, or a potentially difficult contract negotiation is approaching, it may be wise to think about how the event will affect planning.

Once the start date for planning has been determined, the planning team should create a planning schedule. Working backward from the date scheduled for adoption of the plan, the team should identify milestones that signify completion of key phases of planning. A template for creating the schedule is provided on pages 21-24.

Assigning Team Roles

Selecting a leader and one or more facilitators is an important preplanning step.

The leader is the person who determines the *content and monitors the direction* of the planning process. He or she is the person who sets the objectives and agenda for meetings and decides whether planning objectives are being met. The leader should be a person who has a broad knowledge of the district, such as the superintendent or school board president.

Facilitators are people who *focus on the process itself*. They keep meetings on track, making sure everyone has an opportunity to speak, reframing key issues that surface during discussions, and helping the team reach consensus. The same person can lead and facilitate if the two roles are clearly separated.

Team members must decide whether the leader or any team members will facilitate or whether they will need to obtain the services of an outside facilitator. The team may want to try a combination—using team members as facilitators for some of the sessions and hiring facilitators for sessions that are likely to require special expertise or total neutrality.

The team may want to identify knowldgeable people who will remain outside the planning process but serve as unbiased observers and advisors. These "critical friends" often can see problems with the process more clearly than those involved. Frequently, critical friends are university faculty members, business people, teachers or administrators from other districts, or independent consultants.

If a critical friend is not available, the team can begin each meeting by designating one member to serve as a process observer.

Process Tip

Utilize a Critical Friend

Sometimes individuals and teams *develop blind spots because they are so close to the process. Asking an "outsider" to serve as a critical friend may help. A critical friend can assist the planning process by:*

Asking thought-provoking questions

Observing and commenting on the process

Reminding the team about communicating with stakeholders

Reminding leaders to stay involved and listen more

Critiquing the process

Reacting to elements of the plan

In no circumstance, however, should a district hire a consultant to create a ready-made plan. The collaboration of stakeholders is essential.

Preparing the Team to Begin

As the planning team begins its task, each member should know the answers to the following questions:

- What are we trying to accomplish?
- Who are our stakeholders?
- When are we expected to complete the plan?
- Whose approval do we need for our decisions?
- What decisions have already been made?
- How do we fit in with other groups? What groups will support us? What groups may oppose or criticize us?
- With whom are we expected to communicate? How often? By what means?
- What resources and support are at the team's disposal?
- Do all members see their work with the planning team as essential and important?

To ensure an effective process, the team also may want to set ground rules for its meetings, determine the best time of day and length for meetings, and decide how conflicts or performance problems will be addressed.

Team members should use the preparation period to build their knowledge about research-based school improvement models and effective planning approaches. They also should consider attending workshops together to learn more about each other's personalities, assumptions, biases, thinking styles, and problem-solving approaches. An explicit dialogue about these matters can save time and prevent future conflicts and misunderstandings.

Developing a Communication Plan

A brief, informal communication plan will help the planning team maintain consistent, productive interactions with stakeholders and other team members. The plan should:

- Identify points in the process when the team will share progress with the whole district
- Determine what type of input will be needed from specific stakeholder groups
- Decide how progress will be reported and what communication vehicles will be used
- Identify major points of contact for stakeholders who have questions or comments, as well as other methods for collecting suggestions.

Initiating the Process

The district's leaders should consider holding a public event to educate stakeholders about continuous improvement and make them aware of the district's continuous improvement planning process.

At this event, leaders should introduce and state their support for planning team members. The planning team members should inform stakeholders about any public forums or other events that will be held, as well as encourage stakeholders to offer ideas or ask questions at any time of any team member. The communication plan can be shared at this event.

Following this event, it is likely that there will be a range of reactions throughout the district—fear and cynicism, as well as curiosity and excitement. Both supporters and opponents will be watching to see what happens next. The planning team should observe two guidelines at this time:

- Follow the announcement of the planning process with some visible actions or communications that let stakeholders know continuous improvement is under way.
- Respond immediately and enthusiastically to questions and ideas from stakeholders. If early attempts to participate are not welcomed, the word will travel fast.

Extending the Process

Planning teams should remember that they are not just engaging in a one-time planning effort. In a sense, they are pioneering a new way of making decisions that will continue at the district level and become adopted by work groups and teams. Since what the planning team learns can help others, it should be shared.

Question

What makes a planning team productive?

Members are motivated by a desire to help students succeed.

The atmosphere is relaxed.

The team's mission is clear.

Every meeting has a clear purpose.

Members feel they have an important job to do.

Members listen to each other.

Members express ideas freely.

Members are open in addressing disagreements and focus on solving problems.

Everyone has an equal voice.

Decisions are made through consensus.

Checklist for Continuous Improvement Planning

Before Planning Begins:

- ☐ Are district leaders committed to continuous improvement and willing to participate in and support the planning process?
- ☐ Does the planning team include representatives from key stakeholder groups? If all groups are not represented on the core planning team, have advisory groups or other mechanisms for their participation been created?
- ☐ Has the planning team received necessary training? Have they determined how they will communicate with stakeholders who are not members of the team?
- ☐ Has the planning team mapped out the key sessions in the planning process? Has a decision been made about when building-level planning will begin and how it will connect to the district-level planning process?

During Planning:

- ☐ Have baseline data been collected and analyzed? Were these data used in the analysis of needs and strengths? Are data being identified for measuring performance results indicators?
- ☐ Are stakeholders participating in the process? Are they kept informed of important developments?
- ☐ Are leaders showing visible support for the planning process? Are they doing everything possible to enhance the team's effectiveness?
- ☐ Are planning sessions productive? Is the planning schedule being met? Are the facilitators keeping the process on track? Are the techniques employed for generating ideas, analyzing data, evaluating alternatives, and achieving consensus effective?
- ☐ Have all available resources been identified? Have all regulations related to federal and state funding been observed?

During Review of the Written Plan:

- ☐ Do the vision, mission, and beliefs reflect the thinking of all stakeholder groups?
- ☐ Does the analysis of needs and strengths accurately reflect the district's baseline performance data? Does it reflect stakeholders' thinking about the districts's needs, strengths, opportunities, and threats? Do stakeholders agree that the needs and strengths identified are the most important ones?
- ☐ Do the goals reflect a few major improvements in student performance and in the processes that affect student learning? Are the goals clearly stated?
- ☐ Do performance results indicators represent achievement of the goals? Do they describe results that can be seen and/or measured? Have data sources and collection methods been identified for each indicator?
- ☐ Will the strategies produce the results described in the performance results indicators? Will individual buildings and groups find the strategies meaningful and be able to contribute to their achievement? Have process indicators been developed to measure interim progress in carrying out strategies?
- ☐ Does the action plan identify all the tasks required for carrying out the strategies? Has an individual or a group been assigned responsibility for each task? Does each task have a timeline?
- ☐ Does the action plan identify all the financial costs and other resource requirements for each task? Are existing funds from the district's budget, federal and state grants, foundation grants, and community-based fundraising being allocated or reallocated in ways that support the plan?
- ☐ Have procedures been developed for evaluating the results of the plan?

During Implementation:

- ☐ Is everyone in the district aware of the plan? Is the plan used to guide decisions and actions?
- ☐ Are the data associated with performance results indicators and process indicators being collected consistently? Is progress toward the indicators being measured on a regular basis? Are these results being used to fine tune the strategies and action plans?
- ☐ Are progress and results reviewed frequently for the tasks identified in the action plan? Are the evaluation procedures being used to make needed adjustments to the implementation process?
- ☐ Is a comprehensive review of the entire plan held every year? Are strategies improved or replaced when progress is poor? Are new challenges added to the plan when goals are met?

Process Design Template

Planning the Continuous Improvement Process

Use this worksheet to map out the planning process and record progress. Before beginning, fill in the projected start and end dates for each phase. When a phase is complete, check off the items presented in each box and record the actual completion date.

Phase 1: Preparation

Scheduled Leadership Team Meetings

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

- ☐ Champions selected?
- ☐ Team members selected?
- ☐ Staff support for team in place?
- ☐ Team's schedules adjusted?

Scheduled Preparatory Sessions for Planning Team

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ Completed By: _____

- ☐ Team leader selected?
- ☐ Facilitator(s) selected?
- ☐ Recorder(s) selected?
- ☐ Vision/Mission discussed?
- ☐ Meeting rules established?
- ☐ Communication plan done?

Key Training Sessions for the Planning Team

Session Title	Date:
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Phase 1 Schedule

Start Date:

Projected Completion Date:

Actual Completion Date:

Milestone 1: *We are prepared to initiate continuous improvement planning. We have scheduled our district-wide kickoff event on:*

_____

Phase 2: Analysis

Phase 2 Schedule

Start Date:

Projected Completion Date:

Actual Completion Date:

Schedule of Community-wide Sessions

Schedule of Regular Team Meetings

- ☐ Data collected and analyzed?
- ☐ Process followed?
- ☐ Stakeholders kept informed and involved?

Milestone 2: *We have collected and analyzed key data and identified the district's needs and strengths. We will share our data and our statements of needs and strengths with the community on:*

Phase 3: Planning

Note: The number of lines for each step may not correspond to the number of sessions actually needed.

Phase 3 Schedule

Start Date:

Projected Completion Date:

Actual Completion Date:

1. Goal Setting Sessions:

2. Performance Results Indicators Sessions:

3. Strategy Development Sessions:

4. Top-Level Action Planning Sessions:

Writing and Review Schedule:

Outline written by: _____

First draft written by: _____

Leaders and team reviews by: _____

Second draft written by: _____

Community-wide reviews by: _____

Milestone 3: *The team and stakeholders have reached consensus about goals, performance results indicators, and strategies in our plan. Top-level action plans for each strategy are complete and the resources have been allocated. Our written plan has been reviewed. We will adopt the plan by:*

_____

Phase 4: Implementation: Year One

Phase 4 Schedule

Leadership Team Sign-off

_____

Presentation to Entire District

_____

Implementation Formally Begins

_____

Date for First Major Yearly Review

_____

Major Checks of Performance Results Indicators

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

District-Wide Action Plan Review Dates

Sept. _____

Oct. _____

Nov. _____

Dec. _____

Jan. _____

Feb. _____

Mar. _____

Apr. _____

May _____

Summer _____

Schedule of Formal Communications with Community

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Milestone 4: *We have implemented our action plan, periodically checked our indicators, and frequently discussed our progress using the evaluation procedures we created. Building-Level planning is complete or well under way. We have completed our yearly review and are ready to revise the plan. We will complete our revisions by:* _____

A Periodic Check-up:

Evaluating the Planning Team's Progress

Districts can help keep the planning process on track by asking the team to evaluate their progress at regular intervals. Make several copies of this form for each team member or distribute it at key intervals. There may be stages when you will want to evaluate progress every week.

In general, are we making good progress in developing our plan?

_____

What have we accomplished since the last time we evaluated our progress?

_____

_____

_____

Where did we get off track? What worked? What didn't work?

_____

_____

_____

Do we have any unresolved conflicts within the team that need to be discussed? If so, describe briefly:

_____

_____

_____

Is there anything a team member is concerned about? If so, describe briefly:

_____

_____

_____

Have we communicated with our stakeholders since the last evaluation? What information did we provide to everyone? What questions did we answer? What feedback did we receive?

_____

_____

_____

When will we evaluate our progress next, and what do we intend to accomplish by then?

_____

_____

_____

Define Beliefs, Vision, and Mission

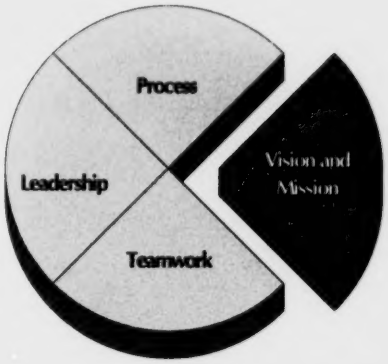
Beliefs are the principles and ideas that govern the district's decisions and actions.

Beliefs influence vision and mission.

Vision is the school district's picture of its future.

Mission is the reason a school district exists.

Fulfilling the mission is how a district realizes its vision.



Important changes and improvements always stem from "big ideas" that foster ongoing enthusiasm and commitment from the people involved. The inspiring ideas for a continuous improvement plan come from a district's beliefs, vision, and mission.

Many of Ohio's local school boards already have articulated the guiding beliefs, visions, and missions of their districts. In these districts, planning teams and school board members should revisit the process that was used to develop these statements. If stakeholder groups were involved, they may want to call upon the same groups and individuals to participate in dialogue sessions.

If stakeholders were not involved, or if the current vision and mission do not seem to be influencing stakeholders, the school board and planning team may want to discuss them with stakeholders and refine them.

If vision and mission statements do not exist, the planning team and school board should work together to institute a community-wide process for creating them.

Defining/Refining Beliefs, Vision, and Mission

Planning team and school board members can approach defining or refining their district's vision and mission in a variety of ways. They may wish to seek ideas from everyone in the district and use the ideas as a basis for the final statements. Or they may want to create drafts and then seek comments on the drafts from everyone.

Planning teams should follow the process and style that they believe will result in a clear sense of a common purpose, widespread enthusiasm, and a greater consistency in how people make decisions and carry out their daily roles.

Question

Can the team start the analysis phase without a firm vision and mission statement?

In many cases, team members and stakeholders don't know enough about the district's needs and strengths to be able to create effective vision and mission statements. Planning teams may choose to build a vision and mission as they go through the analysis and early planning stages.

In such instances, the team may want to use this section of the guide at three or four points in the process–first familiarizing themselves with the concepts and then holding dialogue and brainstorming sessions about beliefs, vision, and mission at key intervals.

A good time to take stock of the evolving vision and mission is during goal setting. At this point, the team may want to write a first draft of a vision and mission.

Beliefs

Beliefs are the mental models or principles that govern the aspirations and actions of individuals and groups in the district. While different individuals and groups may hold some unique beliefs that fit their specific circumstances and experiences, the planning team should focus on identifying important beliefs about student performance and the processes that affect students so that these beliefs will be reflected in the vision and mission statements.

The purpose of identifying the beliefs that shape the district's current reality is twofold: the team will examine and challenge unfounded assumptions that may be interfering with change and they will place a greater emphasis on the beliefs that are fundamental to success when creating a vision and mission.

The Vision

A shared vision can be articulated by asking students, students' family members, teachers and administrators, business people and community members to describe what they would like to see in the district within ten years.

Specific questions to explore could include:

- What would learning look like? What would students be doing and how would they behave? What would classrooms look like? What would teachers be doing? What would professional development look like? What other people might be present in the classroom and what would they do? What objects might be seen there?
- What would the halls be like? The library? The cafeterias? The faculty lounges? The playgrounds? What would students be doing in the community and the workplace? After graduation?
- What would relationships between students and teachers be like? What would be done when students are disruptive or have academic problems? How would achievement and positive behavior be recognized?
- What would relationships between teachers and students' families be like? Among teachers? Between teachers and administrators? Between buildings? What would community members and businesses do to support learning?
- What special activities would take place? What would occur at a typical faculty meeting? How would excellent job performance be recognized?

Process Tips

Productive sessions

Explore beliefs, vision, and mission in a relaxed, comfortable setting. Consider providing drawing materials, pictures, music and other creativity tools.

Treat everyone as equals. Be sure to listen to the views of children.

Encourage creative thinking. Be open to unusual ideas.

Provide opportunities for people to build upon each other's ideas.

A "visioning" session may produce hundreds of images. The planning team may want to capture these images in a more detailed description of the future that can be used for motivational purposes.

Successful Follow-Up

Be sure that the vision and mission statements are continually visible to everyone–not just to the planning team.

Publish them in newsletters and display them in hallways, offices, and classrooms.

Discuss them at meetings. Refer to them when planning and making decisions.

Seek examples that show the meaning behind the vision and mission.

Sample Vision Statement

Within ten years, all students in our district will demonstrate, in a variety of ways, that they have achieved a high level of understanding of complex material in each subject area. Students will be excited about learning and convey their sense of excitement to others.

The school will be a safe, comfortable, and accepting environment that embraces all learners in ways that promote equity, communication, and understanding. Individuals will have a sense of respect for themselves and others and will demonstrate a joy in being part of the learning community.

If participants are responding to the visioning process with generalities, ask them to think in pictures by imagining that ten years have passed and they are touring the school district or planning the scenes to be shot for a documentary. Sometimes it also may be helpful to tell participants to imagine they have unlimited resources.

The Mission

A mission statement describes, in a few words, the school district's overall purpose or reason for existence and its beliefs about education. It reflects how education will change the lives of students in the district, what teachers, administrators, and students' families hope will be the district's legacy, and what students will be grateful for long after they have entered adulthood.

In defining the mission, the planning team may explore the following questions with stakeholders:

- What is our purpose? Why does the district exist?
- How do we want to affect students' lives? Why would families choose to send their children to school in our district?
- Why do our staff members go to work every day? What motivates us? What do we do that fulfills us?
- Why should community resources be expended to support this district? What contribution do we want our district to make to the community and the world?
- What would our graduates say in describing their educational experience in the school district? What would we want them to say?

Three Sample Mission Statements

We believe that all students can learn at high levels. It is the job of our schools to replace academic barriers with academic challenges and to give parents the knowledge they need for actively supporting their children's educational goals. We also are responsible for identifying problems in the community that interfere with student achievement, calling attention to those problems, and cooperating with individuals and agencies that are charged with finding and implementing solutions.

Our school district will ensure that every student masters a core of knowledge and skills that will be essential in the 21st century.

Our school district will work as partners with students, their families, business and industry, and the community to improve student performance continuously so that all students achieve the levels of knowledge and skill required for working, living, and learning in a knowledge-based society.

A Dialogue Activity for Small Groups:

Defining Beliefs, Vision, and Mission

Your team can conduct this activity in a number of different ways. You may prefer to go through all the steps before starting to analyze data or you may want to postpone actually writing vision and mission statements until later in the planning process. You may want to go through the steps as a team and then repeat them later with a larger group of stakeholders. If you already have a vision and mission, you may want to use some of the steps to reevaluate them.

Step 1: Interview different stakeholders individually or in groups about their beliefs and discuss findings as a group. Rather than asking them "What do you believe," ask more indirect questions, such as:

- What do you think are the characteristics of an excellent teacher? an excellent principal?
- How would you define a successful student?
- What does every student need in order to reach his or her full potential academically and vocationally?
- What is the ideal learning experience? The ideal learning environment?
- What motivates you to strive for higher performance? What demotivates you?
- How can professional colleagues help one another?
- How do you think society views schools?

Step 2: Review their responses as a group. Based on their responses, write statements that describe prevalent beliefs in the school district.

Focus on beliefs that lead to improved performance and processes, but if you identify beliefs that should be challenged, consider ways to stimulate dialogue in a larger forum.

What are the dominant beliefs that you identified in your interviews?

Step 3: Based on the beliefs you identified, brainstorm about vision and mission. This activity can be done by small groups at a district-wide meeting or it can be done in building- or group-level meetings and then synthesized and shared.

Some Options: Do individually among the planning team and then ask the larger group for reactions.

Do in groups composed of stakeholders with similar interests and backgrounds (e.g. by building, by grade level, by role) or in groups combining people from each stakeholder group.

Vision

Using the questions listed on page 27, describe conditions and actions you would see and hear in 10 years if your school district were to reach its full potential for improvement. Be concrete. Would other people form similar mental pictures from reading what you have written?

Mission

For each vision or image you've described to the left, write a word or brief phrase about what this image says about your district's purpose. What principle of excellent education does the image symbolize? What will it mean to students in the present and in the future. Refer to the Mission questions on page 28.

Example: Students asking many questions about concepts being learned.	Example: Demonstrates critical thinking and active learning. It's a habit that will help them in their careers and as citizens.
Example: Teachers observing and critiquing each other's practices	Example: Dissemination of best practices, ongoing professional development. Develops a collegial spirit.

Vision	*Mission*

Step 4: When you have a number of items listed under vision and mission display a complete list of the items to the whole group and select the 8-10 Vision-Mission combinations that are most important.

Step 5: Draft vision and mission statements that capture the most important ideas.

Step 6: Invite stakeholders to comment on the substance and language of the drafts. Ask some reviewers to discuss their reactions in depth.

Step 7: Display and publish the vision and mission statements prominently. Refer to them when planning and making decisions. Recognize those who honor them.

Vision Statement

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Guidelines for the Vision Statement

Look at the district's future from different stakeholders' perspectives.

Paint a picture of the district as its people want it to be and believe it can be.

Use simple, clear language.

Capture the spirit and reflect the concerns of your school district.

Be brief.

Mission Statement

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Guidelines for a Mission Statement

Keep it brief.

Speak in the first person plural ("we-our" instead of "the district-it").

Describe how the district will affect students.

Capture what education is all about.

Avoid meaningless slogans.

Part II

Analysis

When the planning team and the district's stakeholders are prepared and a planning process has been outlined, the analysis stage of planning can begin. During this phase, the planning team and stakeholders will define and interpret the district's current situation so that the team can examine the gap between the district's current performance and its emerging vision.

Major steps include:

√ **Collecting and analyzing data on district performance**

√ **Determining needs and strengths through environmental scanning.**

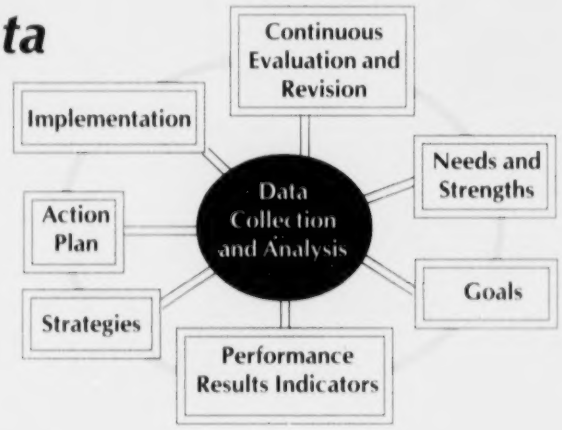
An **independent performance audit** is an excellent tool to use during the analysis phase. Commissioning a trained auditor who is not employed by the district produces an unbiased picture of what a district's performance data reveal about its needs and strengths.

Whether a district uses an independent performance audit or performs the entire assessment internally, the aim of the analysis phase is to identify and describe the areas of performance that need to be targeted in continuous improvement planning.

After following the recommendations in this section, districts will have:

- Baseline data that will aid strategic decision-making and enable the district to determine how much improvement has resulted from the plan
- A clearer idea of what additional data are needed and of how those data will be collected
- Clear statements of the district's needs and strengths that are based on quantitative and qualitative data
- Planning team members who know their purpose and are ready to proceed in an organized way
- Increased stakeholder involvement
- A clearer idea of the district's beliefs, vision, and mission.

Collect and Analyze Data



In the context of continuous improvement, data are observations and measurements used in systematic ways to make decisions. Data are necessary for accurately identifying problems, assessing performance, and determining patterns and relationships.

"Where is the information we have lost in data?"

Hiroshi Inose and J.R. Pierce, Information Technology and Civilization

A key part of developing and implementing a continuous improvement plan is finding and using methods for determining baseline performance and reliably measuring progress. Therefore, continuous improvement planning begins with collecting and analyzing data that provide a picture of the district's current performance. Data the district already has, or can obtain easily, will play a major role in determining the district's needs and strengths. Also data will be essential in creating a system of performance results indicators and using those indicators to measure progress and evaluate the plan.

Obtaining data through quantitative methods—collecting and analyzing numbers and statistics to provide a precise, objective picture of performance—and qualitative methods—determining stakeholders' perceptions and opinions using opinion surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other tools—both are valuable.

Key Term

Independent Performance Audit

A performance audit is a process of identifying discrepancies between what exists on paper (policies, procedures, curriculum, instructional and assessment practices, etc.) and what actually happens in the day-to-day operations of a school district.

Audits are conducted by individuals or organizations not employed by the school district.

An audit may describe how student achievement is defined, demonstrated, and measured, as well as the quality of a district's teaching and learning practices, assessment methods, student services, professional development, learning environments, governance, and family/community involvement.

Auditors also provide recommendations for making improvements.

Collecting Existing Data

Every school can access data from local sources and from the state for use in analyzing needs and strengths.

In collecting existing data, the objective should not be to collect as much data as possible but rather to collect the data that will tell the team what they need to know. To identify possible data sources, the team should answer these questions:

- What data will help us clarify our vision and mission?
- What data will help us measure student performance?
- What data will help us measure the effectiveness of our processes?
- What data will help us evaluate current activities and resource usage to determine the impacts on student performance?

Sources of Quantitative Data: Some Options

Ohio school districts collect a wide variety of data. The options that follow should be viewed as possible data sources that can help planning teams determine which existing sets of data are important for documenting continuous improvement. It is unlikely that a district will find every option provided here to be useful for the purposes of continuous improvement planning.

Data Collected by Schools

As long as laws and regulations concerning privacy are observed, information in student records can be analyzed to determine performance trends. Data from district and school surveys, data used in compiling budgets for district and school programs, data used in performance audits, and data collected by the district for reports to federal and state government or for informing the community or media also can be useful.

Results Data: Examples of student performance data that may be useful include:

- The percentage of students with A, B, C, D, and F averages or the percentage who have achieved the grade-level competencies outlined in Ohio's Competency-Based Education Models
- Results for proficiency tests, standardized tests, and authentic assessments
- Percentage of students retained at each grade level
- Percentage of students who have skipped a grade
- Percentage of third graders reading at grade level
- Percentage of students participating and succeeding in honors courses
- Percentage of special education students and students with disabilities who are successfully included in regular education classes
- Percentage of students participating and succeeding in the Post Secondary Enrollment Option
- Percentage of eighth and ninth graders participating and succeeding in algebra or the percentage who have met ninth grade competencies outlined in the state's Model Competency-Based program for mathematics
- Percentage of high school juniors who pass the Early Mathematics Placement Test
- Percentage of high school students participating and succeeding in foreign languages and advanced mathematics and science
- Percentage of students enrolled in vocational education programs
- Student participation and success rates in remediation programs
- Percentage of students taking the SAT or ACT. Percentage taking the Work Keys Assessment. Average scores for all students, for males and females, and for minority groups.
- Percentage of graduates who have enrolled in higher education
- Percentage of graduates working in skilled or professional positions.

Processes: Examples of data that Ohio schools may collect on the effectiveness of processes and the quality of the learning environment include:

- Teacher-student ratios
- Percentage of five-year-olds attending all-day kindergarten
- Percentage of three- and four-year-olds attending preschool or Head Start
- Ratio of computers to students and level of Internet access available to students
- Number of students involved in community service
- Percentage and/or number of students with policy violations or discipline referrals
- Number of students schooled at home or attending private schools
- Student participation and success rates in prevention and intervention programs
- Student participation rates in various types of extracurricular activities and guidance programs
- Percentage of students working after school
- Percentage of family members actively involved in school activities
- Percentage of total resources allocated to each program
- Profile of educational levels attained by teachers and administrators
- Average number of years in service for teachers, number of new teachers, and the number of teachers who will be retiring within five years
- Number of Individual Professional Development Plans approved by the LPDC
- Teacher participation in specific types of professional development programs
- Number of business and industry groups that are partners with the school district

Data About the Community

School districts also may obtain data from the Census Bureau, local agencies, the chamber of commerce, or other community-based organizations. Such data may include:

- Community population count and demographics
- Average income and percentage of families in the community living in poverty
- Employment rate, percentage of two-income families
- Percentage of single parent families
- Rate of teenage pregnancy
- Crime statistics and the number of youth involved with the juvenile justice system
- Number of recreational options available to youth
- Number of churches in the community
- Number of social service agencies in the community.

Process Tip

As they examine the district's data, planning team members also should discuss how different sets of data are currently collected and used and whether there are more efficient and productive ways to collect and use the data.

EMIS

Through the Education Management Information System (EMIS), the Ohio Department of Education acquires aggregate information from each school district on its students, staff, programs, services, and costs. This information is available to school districts.

Using EMIS, districts can generate reports on:

- Student performance, both district-wide and broken down by building and grade level
- The number of students participating in different types of instruction
- The number of students receiving different types of support services from local sources or from the state
- Attendance rates and the average daily attendance for the year; mobility rates; expulsion rates; suspension rates; dropout rates; rates of retention in grade; average Carnegie units for grades 9-12, and graduation rates
- Data on personnel, student demographics, and costs.

Local Report Cards

In August 1997, the Ohio General Assembly passed Amended Substitute Senate Bill 55—a performance accountability bill for school districts and buildings. The legislation requires the Ohio Department of Education to issue a report card to every school district. Issuing prototype report cards in 1998 represents the first stage of this process.

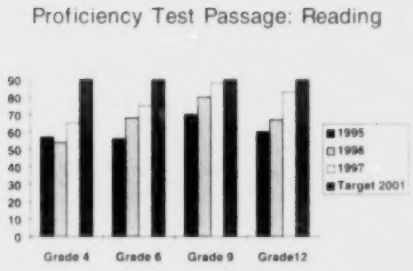
Each District Performance Report will provide a district profile and data about the district's performance from the previous school year. Districts will see how their performance compares to that of districts with similar characteristics.

Qualitative Data Analysis

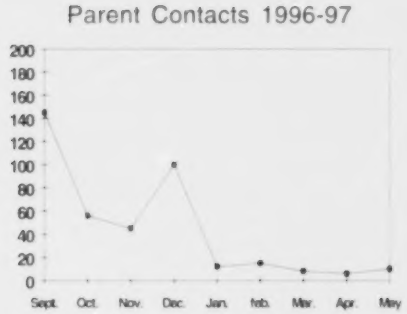
In addition to looking at "hard" data, the planning team also may want to collect and analyze qualitative information related to the trends and opinions that affect the district's performance. Methods include:

- Conducting an opinion survey by mail or phone
- Interviewing stakeholders or conducting focus groups
- Asking critical friends to tour school buildings and record their observations
- Visiting students' homes and touring local businesses
- Surveying popular newspapers and magazines, as well as professional journals and education-related books to see what topics are most frequently addressed.

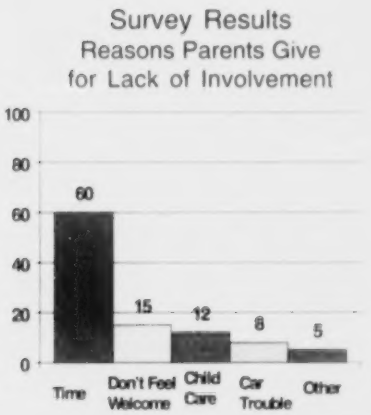
Determining the perceptions and opinons of stakeholders is the main purpose of qualitative research. Additional activities for eliciting responses are outlined in the next section, "*Analyze Needs and Strengths.*"



A bar chart is a good way to compare performance to targets.



A line chart enables you to see changes over time more clearly.



Pareto charts are a good way to display causes, effects, and other factors in a descending order of importance or frequency.

Displaying Data

Before a planning team begins to analyze data, they may want to display it in graphical form. Often, trends and patterns can be seen more readily in a graphic than in columns of numbers. The types of graphics most commonly used are bar charts, line charts, and pie or Pareto charts:

- Bar charts are helpful for showing increases and decreases and for comparing sets of data.
- Line charts help in seeing trends over time.
- Pie charts and Pareto charts can be used to show the frequency with which characteristics or behaviors occur or how they are distributed among different groups.

Analyzing Data

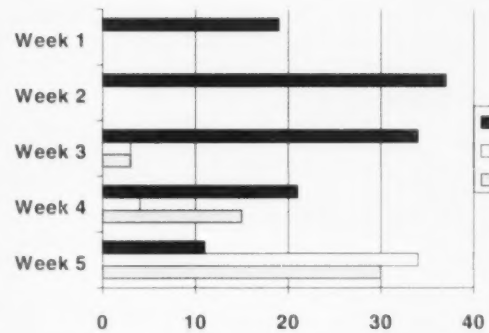
In analyzing each set of data, consider these questions:

- Do these data tell us something important about our school district's performance? Are there gaps in the data? What don't we know?
- Do the data suggest that performance is improving or declining? If we continue progressing at the current rate, where will we be next year? In five years?
- Are there variations among different subgroups? What do high performing students and groups have in common? Are certain actions and characteristics more common at some grade levels than at others? Is one racial or ethnic group progressing at a faster or slower rate than others? If so, what else is different in this group's experience?
- Is change more pronounced at specific times in the year? If so, what may be influencing the difference? Can positive influences be extended through more of the year? Can negative influences be counteracted?
- What can we see when we look at two or more sets of data together? Does improvement in one area influence what happens in another? Is a problem being shifted from one group to another?

Some Examples

Negative Behaviors vs. Interventions

This chart suggests that teachers do not begin using family conferences and service referrals until well after performance problems have begun occurring. Also notice how in Week 5 family conferences and service referrals increase sharply? The reason for this increase is that the school holds its family conferences in Week 5. Notice how in Week 4 (when conferences are scheduled) and week 5 (conference week) markedly fewer performance problems occur? This could this mean that the certainty of home-school contact is a deterrent to performance problems.



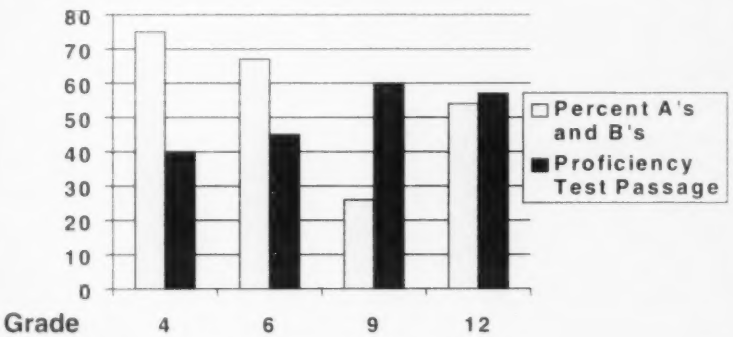
"Performance problems" includes missed assignments, failed tests, and disruptive behavior

Number of performance problems*, home contacts, and service referrals

Proficiency Test Performance Vs. Grades

Percentages of students with A or B averages in math and language arts compared to Proficiency Test passage rates.

This chart shows that in Grades 4 and 6, many students receive grades of A or B but do not pass the Proficiency Tests, while the reverse occurs in Grade 9. Results like this should be studied and discussed in depth before conclusions are drawn. What are some possible conclusions that could be drawn?



Planning Team Activity: Analysis of Data

Identify the most accurate, detailed sets of data curently available for measuring student performance and the effectiveness of processes for teaching and learning; assessment; professional development; student services; use of facilities/environments; organization, governance, and resource leveraging; and family, community, and business involvement.

Which of these data sets will help determine needs and strengths that may exist in your district?

- Do you see patterns or trends in the data?
- Do different measurement tools suggest different conclusions?
- Do you see relationships among different sets of data?
- Do you see ways these data can be collected, compiled, and displayed more efficiently and effectively?
- Are there gaps in the data?

Data Collection:

Evaluating Your Sources of Data

This activity will help you identify which datasets are relevant to the planning process, determine what can be learned from the data you have selected, and assess how the collection and analysis of these data can be improved.

---

1. Identify the major sets of data curently available for measuring student performance:

2. Identify the major sets of data currently available for the seven process areas.

Teaching and Learning	Student Services

Assessment

Facilities/Environments

Professional Development

Organization, Governance, and Resource Leveraging

Family, Business, and Community Involvement

3. List the data sets that may be relevant to your district's vision and mission.

4. Next to each data set, write a question or questions about your district's performance that might be answered (wholly or partially) by the data.

Data	Questions Data May Answer
Example: Percentage of students who took the SAT and ACT each year.	Example: Is the percentage of high school seniors in our district who take ACT and SAT increasing or decreasing? Are our district's average ACT and SAT scores improving?

Data	Questions Data May Answer

5. How would you display these data sets graphically?

6. Can these data be collected, compiled, and disseminated more efficiently and effectively?

7. Analyze each data set.

   Which data provide results at different points in time? Do you see any possible patterns or trends?

   Which sets of data enable you to compare the performance of people in different groups? Do you see any differences?

8. Now look at different combinations of the data sets.

   What are some possible relationships that may exist among different sets of data?

   Are there different data sets that may answer the same question? Do these data sets suggest the same or different answers to the question?

Determine Needs and Strengths

A need is the difference between current and desired conditions. A strength is an existing or emerging capacity for improvement. Analyzing district needs and strengths will help ensure that the plan is focused not only on doing things right but also on doing the right things.

"The things we fear most in organizations–fluctuations, disturbances, imbalances–are the primary sources of creativity."

Margaret Wheatley,
Leadership and the New Science

A continuous improvement plan must provide strategies that build upon the district's existing strengths and address its needs. Therefore, the planning team should use the baseline data they have collected and additional qualitative data from stakeholders to improve understanding of the district's current needs and strengths.

Conduct an Environmental Scan

Environmental scanning is a term business planners use to describe the process of assessing an organization's current situation. Scanning the environment in which the school district currently operates will prepare the planning team to identify and understand the critical issues that are sure to emerge during planning. An environmental scan includes:

- Reviewing the district's history
- Analyzing external forces that affect results
- Examining the internal forces that affect results
- Forecasting future changes and opportunities.

Engaging the entire community in dialogue about its current needs and strengths provides the planning team with a more accurate picture of the environment and a better idea of what improvements stakeholders will expect to see and what types of change they will accept and reject. The planning team should consider meeting with several different groups or holding district-wide meetings to scan the current environment.

Following are four activities that will help district planning teams stimulate dialogue about the current environment. It is probably best to keep these four activities distinct from one another but schedule them close together so that participants will see that they are connected. The object of these activities is to achieve *consensus* about what needs are to be met and what assets are to be strengthened.

Key Term

What is Consensus?

Consensus does not mean that everyone agrees 100 percent with an opinion or idea. It means that after discussion, most team members agree with a particular decision and that those who disagree are willing to accept the decision and try to make it work. It also means that those who disagree are free to gather more data and raise the issue again if indicated.

Process Tip

Possible Participants in Environmental Scan

Students (including those who are at risk or failing academically)

Parents, grandparents, and other family members (including some who are currently not active in the schools)

Local educators, including preschool and Head Start providers

Local school board members

Legislators and policy-makers

Local chamber of commerce members

Local employers

Business leaders

Citizens of the community without children in the schools, particularly senior citizens

Financial experts

Technology experts

College admissions officers

College of education faculty and faculty who teach freshman courses

Social service providers

Health care providers

Law enforcement providers

State Department of Education personnel

Activity One: Looking Back

The planning team should begin the environmental scan by *reviewing the district's history.* Ideas include:

- Asking veteran teachers and former students whose children are now enrolled to express their views about how the schools have changed
- Drawing a timeline and asking participants to fill in the major events, traditions, people, and changes that have shaped the district and community over time
- Asking each participant to list the three greatest successes and the three greatest disappointments experienced in the district over the past five years.

Activity Two: Looking Outward

It is important to *analyze the district's external environment.* Every school district is influenced by outside forces that both help and hinder improvement.

To assist this analysis, the planning team should share the baseline data they have collected with stakeholders and ask them to analyze it in terms of their experience. To help obtain qualitative data from stakeholders, the team may ask interested individuals to work in study groups that gather information from magazines and journals or to conduct interviews with experts. They may assemble focus groups of key stakeholders and ask them to discuss existing and emerging trends in their areas of expertise that may affect the district over the next five years.

Some key questions for each group:

- *Students and their families:* What trends in family and community life affect our district?
- *Business community:* What economic and job market trends should we consider?
- *Higher education community:* What problems do students experience in college? What resources exist for helping teachers, students, and students' families?
- *Local professionals in law enforcement, social services, and health care:* What social problems exist in the community that can impact education? What resources exist to help solve these problems?
- *Local educators and faculty from colleges of education:* What promising ideas or models are found in current educational research ?
- *Local preschool and Head Start providers:* How are children being prepared for kindergarten?
- *Political leaders and ODE staff:* What new state and federal mandates, policies, and initiatives will affect our district?

Process Tip

Using Small Groups

The groups engaged in these four activities should be representative of the district as a whole. Therefore, one continuous whole-group discussion is probably not the best way to give everyone a voice.

Instead, begin the activities in small groups, making sure that different roles and viewpoints are represented in each group and that each group has a facilitator. Then allow each group to share its conclusions with the whole group.

Activity Three: Looking Inward

The heart of the environmental scan is examining the current state of the district and assessing internal conditions that influence its performance. Some avenues to explore include:

- *Examining the district's overall condition:* Do most people view the district's past performance as highly effective, in need of some improvement, or very poor? Currently, is the district facing any major problems or opportunities that are out of the ordinary (e.g. strikes, repeated failure of levies, major lawsuits, intense competition from private schools)? What do stakeholders think about the need for continuous improvement planning? What features or competencies are cited as sources of pride?
- *Examining all the data that have been collected:* What do the data say about the district's strengths and weaknesses? Does the district measure what is important? What else should be measured?
- *Asking teachers, administrators, other staff members, students, parents, business people, and community members what they view as major problems for the district:* What solutions have been proposed? What issues have created controversies? What are the biggest complaints heard about education in the district?
- *Describing the current structures, culture, processes, roles, policies and practices that are most influential in the district:* Why do people resist change? What is happening that demotivates students, teachers, administrators, and family members? What major opposing viewpoints exist in the district? What are the strongest partnerships in the district? What reforms have been tried in the past, how were they accepted, and what were their effects?
- *Looking at the district's current financial standing:* How does it compare with similar districts? What are the greatest financial challenges?
- *Analyzing how resources are currently used:* What activities have received the largest portions of discretionary funds? How effective are these activities? How are time and facilities used in the district?
- *Examining plans, mission statements, and other documents used in the past:* Are they still valid? Why did they succeed or fail?

Activity Four: Looking Forward.

Future changes at the local, state, and national level may help or hinder a district's improvement efforts. Assessing future opportunities and threats will help a district develop a plan that will continue to be valuable in the future.

Questions to help discover possible opportunities and threats include:

- What future opportunities and threats are suggested by our analysis of the quantitative data?
- Based on what has already been said about current conditions, what are some likely scenarios for the future? What shifts in policy, economic trends, political issues, cultural shifts, and other changes are beginning to occur at the local, state, and national levels?
- What are successful school districts doing? What changes are being advocated by community leaders and legislators?
- What new knowledge is being generated outside of education that may bring dramatic changes? (e.g. brain research, software engineering, business models)
- What jobs and careers will be strongest in the future? What skills will be required?

Process Tip

About Dialogue

Physicist David Bohm and organizational expert Peter Senge offer some useful insights about dialogue.

Dialogue is collective thinking and inquiry among colleagues.

Dialogue is a search for common meaning.

There is no "winner" in a dialogue.

In dialogue, you hold your assumptions out for examination.

Adapted from Peter Senge's, The Fifth Discipline

Analysis of Needs and Strengths

Based on the data assembled and analyzed by the planning team and the qualitative data gathered through the environmental scan, the team should be able to state the district's most important needs and strengths. These statements will be the basis of the entire plan. They should reflect the consensus of the planning team and stakeholder participants about what has been learned through data analysis and environmental scanning activities.

- The need statements should represent the most significant gaps between the district's current state and its vision and mission. They should identify obstacles that must be eliminated or overcome.
- The strength statements should represent the most significant strengths the district has to help it fulfill its mission and achieve its vision. They should identify supportive factors that must be protected and further strengthened.

Need and Strength Statements

Tell what problems must be solved.

Tell what requirements must be fulfilled.

Tell what opportunities should be pursued.

Sample Needs and Strengths

Note: Most districts will identify more data, needs and strengths than are identified here.

Data

In 1996, our district conducted a formal study of its K-12 curriculum and instruction. The study identified several significant gaps between content taught at successive grade levels, several areas of unnecessary duplication, and several missed opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, sharing of resources, and teacher collaboration.

Three focus groups of middle school and high school teachers agreed that students are not transferring knowledge and skills from one discipline to another (e.g. subjects addressed in mathematics are not applied in science and social studies.)

Employers interviewed by a local task force in 1996 said that graduates from our school district often lack the initiative to find solutions on their own

Analysis of proficiency test data for 1994-97 shows that at each grade level, an average of only 20% of the students who did not pass were referred for *any* type of intervention before the test and only 50% after failing the test.

Over 60% of students with academic problems have been found to have multiple risk factors in their backgrounds.

A program at our middle schools to introduce students to career options have sparked a great deal of enthusiasm in the local business community. A high number of students and students' family members cited this program's value on a survey.

Our Family Involvement Program, developed in 1992, has not met its goals. Most parents and family members in our district play no significant role in school activities. Fairly high interest is shown in the Fall but quickly tapers off by November.

We have received 500 evaluation forms from parents about our Safe and Drug-Free Schools Plan. Ninety-six percent agreed with the plan and over 100 parents added positive comments.

Need Statements

1. The district needs a more coherent curriculum and a more varied range of engaging instructional methods.
2. Teachers need to collaborate across grade levels and buildings in creating learning experiences.
3. Teachers need to collaborate with parents and members of the business and higher education communities in creating learning experiences that are relevant to future opportunities.
4. Students need learning experiences that are relevant to their career goals.
5. We need methods for identifying learning problems when they first begin to occur.
6. We need to view problems with student performance from the perspective of students' backgrounds and home lives.
7. We need to rethink our approach to family involvement.

Strength Statements

1. We have an excellent career exploration program developed by our middle schools.
2. Our safe and drug-free schools plan was created with outstanding support from parents and contains a number of promising strategies.
3. Our district is fully networked, we have a fairly well equipped computer lab in each building, and we have at least one computer in each classroom.

Environmental Scanning Activities:

Exploring Past, Present, and Future Conditions

Step 1: Influences

What have been the most significant influences on the district's current environment? Responses may include people, organizational changes, events, policies, social issues, professional issues, etc.

	Influences	Effects
Before 1970		
1970-80		
1980-90		
1990-present		

Step 2: *SWOT* Analysis

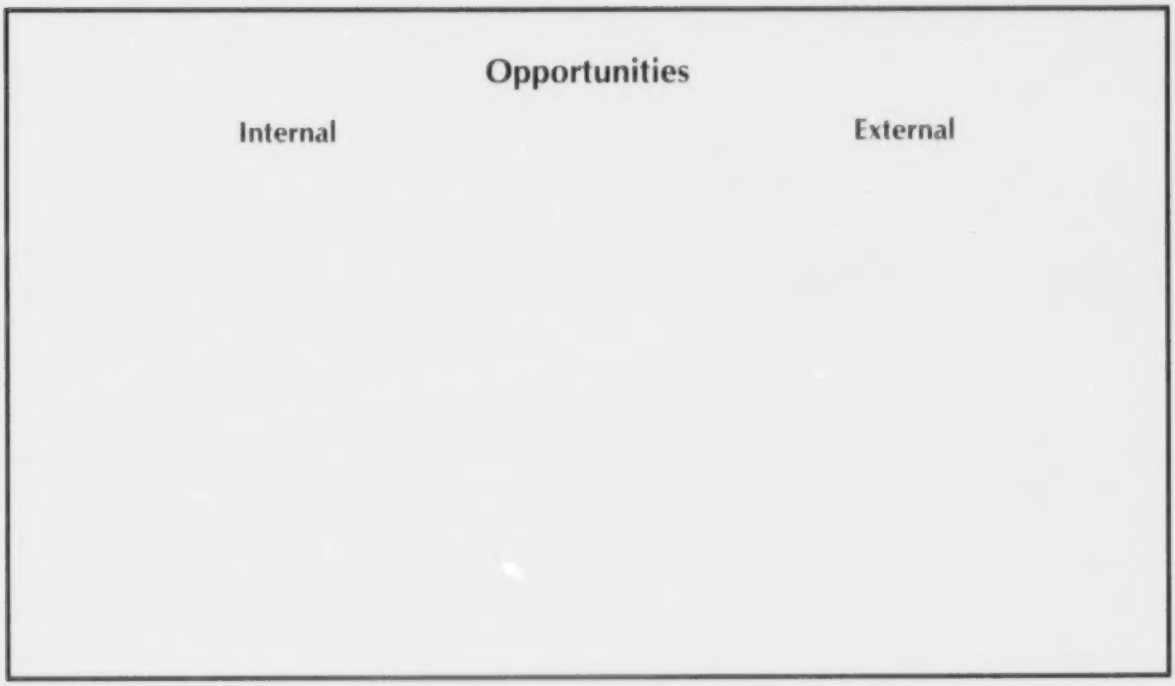
Based on the dialogue you have been engaged in with stakeholders, what are the most important *S*trengths, *W*eaknesses, *O*pportunities, and *T*hreats (SWOT) related to the success of your district? Record key observations in the space below and on the next page.

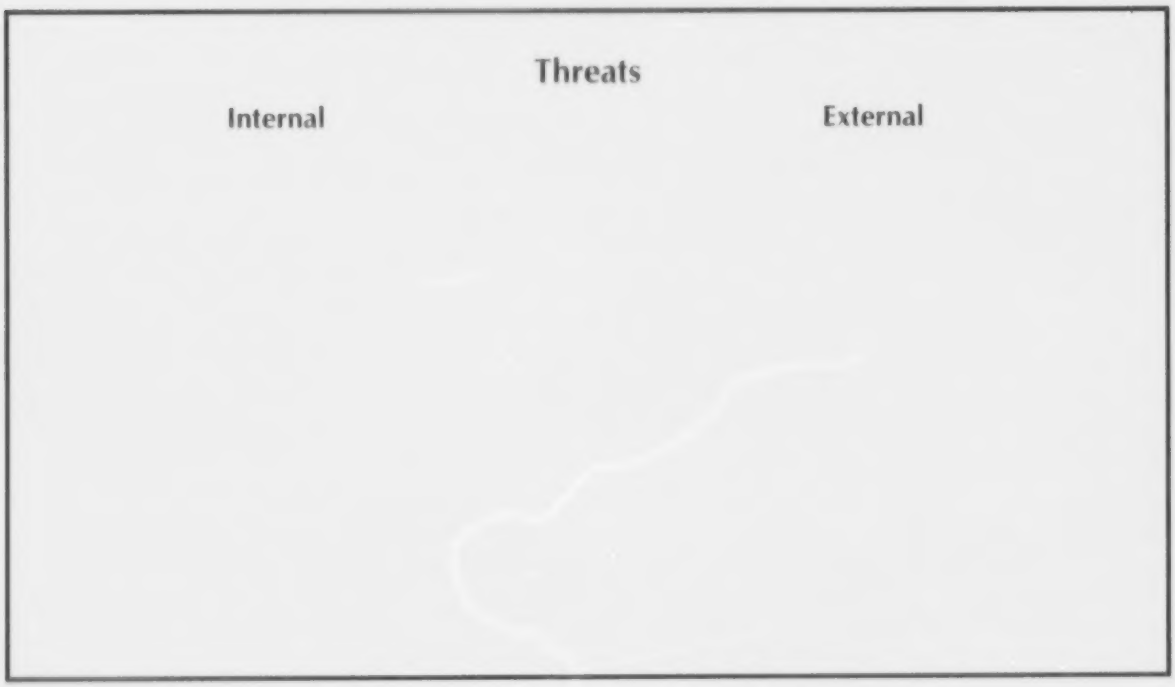
Strengths

Internal **External**

Weaknesses

Internal **External**





Step 3: Choose the Most important Observations.

If you're having trouble agreeing on which observations are most significant, try multi-voting. Place each observation on a Post-It note and stick the notes on a wall in spaces assigned to each of the seven process areas. Give each participant 18 colored adhesive dots. Under each of the seven process areas, ask them to stick three dots next to the observations they consider vital. They can place all three dots next to one observation or divide their dots among two or three. The three observations in each process area with the most dots should be incorporated into your needs statements.

Step 4: Stating Your District's Major Needs and Strengths

Based on the important observations identified in Step 3 and the data you indicated as relevant on pages 42-43, write need and strength statements. In the first segment of the chart, write statements that relate to results. Then, using these results as a basis, write need and strength statements for the seven process improvement areas.

	Needs: We need to . . .	**Strengths:** We can build upon . . .
Results (Student Performance)		
Teaching and Learning		
Assessment		
Professional Development		
Student Services		
Use of Facilities/ Environments		
Organization, Governance, and Resource Leveraging		
Parent and Community Involvement		

Part III

Strategic Decision-making

The data analysis and discussions conducted in the Analysis phase should have produced a common picture of the district's current situation and its relationship and role in the community. It also should have helped to clarify and refine the vision and mission. Using the district's vision and mission statements, the data that were identified as relevant to the planning process, and the need and strength statements, the planning team next should turn its attention to making strategic decisions.

Strategic decision-making is a process of determining what improvements to target, how to measure results, and how to ensure that improvement occurs.

Strategic decision-making is the central focus in developing an initial plan, and it is a process in which teams will engage as the plan is implemented and evaluated. The process consists of four major steps, each requiring more specific thinking than the one before:

√ **Setting goals that describe** the major results to be achieved in 3-7 years

√ **Setting performance results indicators** to be used in measuring the district's success in meeting its goals

√ **Determining strategies** that will enable the district to reach its indicators

√ **Developing the action plan** that describes what specific tasks are to be performed in carrying out the strategies, who will do those tasks, what resources they will require, and when they will be completed.

After following the recommendations in this section, districts will have:

- The basis for writing an effective plan: A few over-arching goals that represent the major actions needed to fulfill the district's vision and mission, performance results indicators to use in measuring the goals, strategies that describe how the district will achieve the performance results, and process indicators to use in measuring the district's effectiveness in carrying out the strategies
- A specific top-level action plan that can be used by responsible buildings, groups, and individuals to perform the tasks assigned to them and to develop more detailed action plans for specific activities
- Even greater stakeholder involvement and a clearer idea of the district's shared beliefs, vision, and mission.

Set Goals

Goal-setting is a process of determining the basic directions to be taken by the school district. Goals are statements that give additional meaning and focus to the district's mission and vision, help target the district's resources, and serve as a foundation for the strategies that will guide day-to-day operations.

"Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal."

Henry Ford

Goals present the big picture of how a district will meet its needs. They are *long-range targets* that will be reached only if everyone in the district remains committed and focused over a three-to-seven-year period.

In setting district goals, the planning team will be answering this question: *What overall improvements in student achievement, the learning environment, and the district's partnerships with parents, businesses, and community members must occur on a district-wide basis before it can be said that the district has met all of the needs identified and realized its mission and vision?*

What are Effective Goals?

Effective goals are broad in scope and few in number. If a district states 15-20 goals, each of which can be met in a short time through the work of a few people, it has set the bar too low. In contrast, if it chooses goals that would require changes beyond the control of the people in the district, cynicism and frustration are certain. *Plans should be restricted to a few challenging but attainable goals*—each a direct response to the major needs already identified and each requiring district-wide effort.

Effective goals are clearly stated. Although goals should be broad statements of intent, they should not be vague, abstract, or loaded with jargon. Clearly stating goals makes them memorable and helps guide the development of strategies and indicators.

Effective goals are verifiable. It must be possible to establish a set of indicators for each goal that can be used to verify progress. Therefore, the planning team should examine whether it will be possible to demonstrate that the goal has been achieved.

Guidelines for Goal-Setting

Keep goals small in number.

Set goals that are challenging but attainable.

State goals clearly.

State goals in measurable, linear terms.

State goals in positive terms.

Set dates for attainment of goals.

Effective goals are affirmative and proactive. Stating what the district will do rather than what it will not do ensures that goals anticipate the needs and opportunities of the future rather than react to the problems of the past.

Effective goals are time-bound. If there is no completion date for a goal, it will not convey a sense of urgency. The planning team should set dates for attainment of goals.

In evaluating their goals, planning teams should ask:

- Will different stakeholders interpret the goal in a number of dramatically different ways?
- Would the average student or community member find it difficult to understand what the goal means?
- Would every building and stakeholder group in the district be able to contribute to meeting each goal?

Basic Elements of an Effective Goal

Action verb
(develop, redesign, expand, revolutionize)

+ *Descriptive Qualifiers*
(student-focused, targeted, comprehensive, 50% more)

+ *End product*
(curricula, after-school activities, community partnerships)

+ *Target date(s)*
(by 1999, by June)

Sample Goals

Need Statements

1. The district needs a more coherent curriculum and a more varied range of engaging instructional methods.
2. Teachers need to collaborate across grade levels and buildings in creating learning experiences.
3. Teachers need to collaborate with parents and members of the business and higher education communities in creating learning experiences that are relevant to students.
4. Students need learning experiences that broaden their perspectives on the world and that are relevant to their career and lifelong learning goals.
5. We need to identify learning problems when they first begin to occur and provide appropriate help.
6. We need to view problems with student performance from the perspective of students' backgrounds and home lives.
7. Our family involvement approach needs to change.

Strength Statements

1. We have an excellent career exploration program developed by our middle schools.
2. Our safe and drug-free schools plan was created with outstanding support from parents and contains a number of promising strategies.
3. Our district is fully networked, we have a fairly well-equipped computer lab in each building, and we have at least one computer in each classroom.

The following goals are based on the needs and strengths shown on the left.

Student Achievement

Within five years, all students in our district will master a challenging core curriculum.

Within five years, all students in our district will be continually engaged in projects that are closely linked to their current learning needs; that demand creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; and that expose them to a variety of educational and vocational paths.

Improved Learning Environment

Within three years, all faculty members in our district will be actively engaged in collaborative, inter-related curriculum and assessment projects.

Family, Business, and Community Involvement

Within three years, schools in our district will be centers of community-wide learning, where students, their family members, business and industry, and all community members work together toward developing the assets of each individual and the community as a whole.

Goal Setting Activities:

Step 1: Determining What Must Be Changed

Divide the need and strength statements from Page 52 among individual team members or small groups. In the boxes below, each group should write a phrase that summarizes each need statement and each strength statement assigned to them. In the second column on this page, list the major actions and changes that must occur in the district before the need can be met or the strength maximized.

Need/Strength Statements	*Actions and Changes*

Step 2: Generating Goal Statements: Using your notes on the previous page, write goals that relate to the needs and strengths. Work individually or in small groups to generate goal statements.

Student Performance

Learning Environment

Parent, Business, and Community Partnerships

Step 3: Achieving Consensus

When the individuals or small groups have completed their goal statements, bring the whole group back together and display the goal statements. Goals that address similar topics (e.g. curriculum, decision-making processes, etc.) should be displayed together.

The group should spend some time attempting to combine similar goals and critiquing each goal. The group can approach this by discussing the goals. One person can record comments or each person can write comments on Post It notes and fasten them to each goal.

Comments should address these questions:

How well does the goal respond to the district's needs and strengths? The vision and mission?

Is it clear, timely, and important?

Does the goal contain anything that should be eliminated, intensified, or restated? Should anything be added to the goal?

Following this activity, a group of planning team members should write goals that reflect the comments offered and submit them for approval.

Set Performance Results Indicators

Setting performance results indicators is a process of translating goals into results that can be efficiently observed and measured. Effective indicators, accompanied by consistent data collection and analysis, help a school district to focus on results and continuously monitor progress.

Guidelines for Performance Results Indicators

Relate indicators to goals.

State indicators in terms of desired results.

Be realistic, but aim for significant improvements.

Think of indicators as one system for performance measurement.

Be sure indicators can be seen and/or measured on a regular basis.

Identify data collection methods for each indicator.

Determine a baseline data point for each indicator.

High performance districts set goals in order to plot a course for continuous improvement. They create performance results indicators to ensure that continuous improvement stays on course.

Performance results indicators describe in specific, measurable terms how the district will know it is achieving its goals. Most of the time, determining whether an indicator has been met requires collecting data over a period of time and then comparing each new set of data to the baseline data collected during the initial cycle of planning.

Systemic Performance Measurement

Performance results indicators should be viewed as a system for documenting progress toward district goals rather than as individual measurement tools. Sometimes, several indicators are needed to determine whether a goal has been achieved. Sometimes, one indicator represents progress toward multiple goals.

An effective performance measurement system includes two major elements: 1) performance results indicators that describe important results in specific, measurable terms and 2) data that are used to establish a baseline and measure progress against the indicators. With most indicators, it should be possible to measure progress toward the indicator during the 3-7 years in which the goal is being pursued.

Planning teams also may want to consider developing indicators that help in determining whether the district is making the necessary changes in process needed for meeting the goals. These "process indicators" should be developed after the district determines its strategies since they will provide a way of measuring each strategy's effectiveness.

Basic Elements of Effective Indicators

Measurable, Observable, and Significant Action

(percentage of all students who pass the proficiency test or score at Level 5 or above on the Work Keys Assessment, frequency of computer use in each course...)

+ *Desired Change*

(increase, decrease, add, eliminate, complete ...)

+ *Target*

(to 90%, by 2 SUIs, a C average or higher, two times per week, by at least 5 percentage points...)

+ *Time Frame*

(by 1999, every year)

Setting District-Specific Indicators

Each district should develop indicators that represent the high levels of performance outlined in their goals and that enable them to measure performance in specific terms.

A planning team should set performance results indicators that are specific statements of desired results. Questions to help design effective indicators include:

- What actions by a specific group of people will be observed, counted, or measured?
- What is the desired change? In other words, what do you expect to see if an indicator is met?
- Is the desired change meaningful and significant?
- What is the precise target to be met?
- What is the time frame in which change will occur?

Using Statewide Performance Results Indicators

Districts also should examine the state's performance indicators, established by the Ohio General Assembly (see chart on page 61). The statewide indicators represent the *minimum* levels of performance expected from Ohio school districts in eighteen areas related to proficiency test passage, attendance, and dropout rates. As of July 1999, the percentage of indicators met by a district determines its placement in one of four categories: Effective, Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, and Academic Emergency.

Districts categorized as Academic Emergency and Academic Watch should place particular emphasis on meeting the state's indicators as quickly as possible. However, since the statewide indicators represent only minimum levels of acceptable performance, districts should consider meeting these minimum indicators as only an initial goal on the path to high performance.

Illustration of Standard Unit of Improvement

As of 1999, if a school district achieves 12 out of eighteen of the state's performance indicators in a given year, it would be placed in the Continuous Improvement category.

The expected improvement for the next year should be at least one Standard Unit of Improvement (or 2.5 percentage points) for four of the six indicators the district did not meet (four is two-thirds of the unmet indicators).

The district would be expected to move into the Effective category in five years by meeting at least five more indicators than they met in the current year. Therefore, if their performance on an indicator is well below the minimum level, the district would need to improve faster than one SUI per year.

Districts that meet the minimum indicators should promote continued improvement by developing indicators of high performance that are relevant to their needs and strengths. In many cases, districts may use the achievements of the highest performing districts with profiles similar to theirs as benchmarks. Furthermore, since statewide indicators are measured only once a year, districts should develop performance results indicators that they can use throughout the school year.

The Table shown on Page 61, summarizes the state's indicators.

Ohio's Standard Unit of Improvement as a Measurement Tool

Districts also can use the state's Standard Unit of Improvement (SUI) in setting indicators. The SUI and the guidelines for its use were developed to define improvements in rates of proficiency test passage, attendance, and graduation, as well as to describe how much a district should improve per year and what constitutes adequate progress toward overall effectiveness.

One Standard Unit of Improvement equals 2.5 percentage points per year. Districts are expected to improve by at least one SUI for at least two-thirds of the performance indicators they did not meet in the previous year.

Adequate progress also means moving from the current category (Effective, Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, or Academic Emergency) in a set period of time:

- Districts in Academic Emergency will be expected to move into Academic Watch in five years.
- Districts in Academic Watch will be expected to move into Continuous Improvement in three years.
- Districts in the Continuous Improvement category will be expected to move into the Effective category in five years.

See page 61 for a worksheet that will assist in using the SUI to create indicators.

Summary of Ohio's Performance Indicators	
Performance Area	**Minimum Performance**
Dropout Rate	3%
Attendance Rate	93%
Proficiency Test passage rates in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship for students in Grade 4 and for students in the spring of Grade 9.	75%
Proficiency Test passage rates in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship for students in the spring of Grade 10.	85%
Proficiency Test passage rates in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship for students in Grade 12.	60%

Improvement Categories	
Categories	**# Indicators Required**
Effective	17-18
Continuous Improvement	9-16
(Districts in Continuous Improvement should attain the Effective category in five years or less.)	
Academic Watch	7-8
(Districts in Academic Watch should attain the Continuous Improvement category in three years or less.)	
Academic Emergency	0-6
(Districts in Academic Emergency should attain the Academic Watch category in five years or less.)	

Setting Performance Results Indicators

Using State Performance Indicators and the Standard Unit of Improvement

Meeting all of the state's performance indicators should be a fundamental step toward improvement for every district. (Of course, once a district meets an indicator, it should continue striving for higher levels of performance.) The following worksheet simplifies the process of calculating the minimum level of improvement a district should be making toward effectiveness.

1. Last year, we met _____ out of 18 of the state's performance indicators.
2. We did not meet _____of the 18 indicators.
3. This places us in the category _____.
   (see right side of the chart above)
4. This year, we need to improve by one Standard Unit of Improvement (2.5 percentage points) in at least _____indicators (*or 2/3 of the indicators we have not met*).
5. The next highest category is _____.
   (see right side of the chart above)
6. To achieve this category in _____years, we need to meet _____additional performance indicators (*the minimum number required for the next highest category minus the number of indicators we did not met*).

Collecting Data Relevant to Indicators

To be useful, performance results indicators must be used to guide regular data collection, analysis, and use. Therefore, in setting indicators, planning teams must think carefully about what data will be collected and what data collection methods will be used.

Every indicator should be accompanied by data that represent the district's current performance. These data will serve as the performance baseline for the indicator.

Data on proficiency test passage, dropout rates, and attendance rates are readily available. Records kept by school administrators on grades, enrollment, and disciplinary referrals are fairly easy to assemble at the district level. With additional effort, districts can obtain data on college enrollment and employment of graduates, use of specific instructional practices, and parent and family involvement.

Data collection methods that are sometimes overlooked include (but are not limited to):

- Asking teachers, students, and students' family members to provide information about their experiences and opinions on forms or surveys
- Interviewing individuals or focus groups.
- Asking teachers to keep track of specific practices or classroom occurrences using logs or tally sheets
- Designating observers to walk around the school and record their observations of targeted activities
- Assigning students to collect and interpret data
- Examining class projects, results of alternative assessments, and other exhibitions of student knowledge and skill
- Using computer programs to capture data from existing records.

Note: Additional information and activities to assist with data collection and analysis can be found on Pages 34-43.

Sample Performance Results Indicators for a District's Goals

Student Achievement Goals:	*Related Indicators and Data Sources*
Within five years, all students in our district will master a challenging core curriculum.	1. Passage rates on each of the Ohio ProficiencyTests will improve by at least two Standard Units of Improvement per year for three years. Then, results will improve by four SUIs per year. *Data Source: Proficiency test passage rates* 2. Within two years, the percentage of third and fourth graders that demonstrate grade-level reading skills will go from the current 70% to at least 90%. *Data Source: A research-based assessment will be used.* 3. Each year, students at each grade level will demonstrate that they have met at least 75% of the performance objectives in mathematics and language arts for their grade level as outlined in Ohio's Model Competency-Based programs. *Data Source: Data will be obtained by examining results of performance-based assessments* 4. *At least 15% of students at each grade level will demonstrate that they have met at least 90% of the performance objectives outlined in Ohio's Model Competency-Based programs.* *Data Source: Data will be obtained by examining results of performance-based assessments*
Within five years, all students in our district will be continually engaged in projects that are closely linked to their current learning needs; that demand creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; and that expose them to a variety of educational and vocational paths.	5. Each year, students in grades 7-12 will successfully complete at least one independent, interdisciplinary project that meets rigorous, pre-established criteria. *Data Source: Data will be obtained by evaluating the projects. For quality assurance, an assessment specialist will examine randomly selected projects and review how teachers assessed them.* 6. Within five years, at least 90% of students in grades 8-12 will have an up-to-date, well-formulated career and higher education plan and a portfolio of work related to their plan. *Data Source: Interviews with a random sample of students.*

Goals	Related Indicators
Improved Learning Environment Within three years, all faculty members in our district will be actively engaged in collaborative, inter-related curriculum and assessment projects.	7. By next year, each teacher in the district will be participating in a multi-building team that is charged with developing a a portion of the district's curriculum for a core subject, researching new instructional and assessment strategies, increasing partnerships with business and higher education, improving student services, or increasing organizational effectiveness. *Data Collection: Reviewing meeting minutes and Individual Professional Development Plans.* 8. Each year, every teacher will complete at least three professional development experiences or projects based wholly or primarily in his or her building. *Data Collection: Reviewing Individual Professional Development Plans and principals' logs.* 9. Within three years, each teacher will engage in at least one professional development project that involves a partnership with a colleague, business person, parent, or community member who is based at a different location. *Data Collection: Reviewing Individual Professional Development Plans and principals' logs.* 10. Each faculty member will present or demonstrate at least one successful teaching approach to colleagues on two occasions during each year. *Data Collection: Teachers' Individual Professional Development Plans, presentation schedules kept by faculty, and principals' logs.* 11. Every teacher will observe other teachers teaching at least four times per year. On each occasion, teachers will specify at least one thing they observed that will help improve their teaching. *Data Collection: Teachers will record their observations and presenters will incorporate those observations into their Individual Professional Development Plans.*

Note: These indicators are measures of success in meeting goals, not policies or mandates. The next task– developing strategies to ensure that the indicators are met –may or may not result in new policies.

Goals	*Related Indicators*
Family, Business, and Community Involvement Within three years, schools in our district will be centers of community-wide learning, where students, their family members, business and industry, and all community members work together toward developing the assets of each individual and the community as a whole.	12. Within three years, each school will have at least one staff member per 100 students with training in drug prevention and intervention, conflict resolution, violence prevention, and multicultural communications. *Data Collection: Individual professional development plans.* 13. Each year, the percentage of at risk students who receive individualized counseling or mentoring will increase by10 percentage points. *Data Collection: A new data collection strategy will be developed to measure results for this indicator.* 14. Each year, the number of policy violations related to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs will decrease by at least 10 percentage points. *Data Source: Each school's main office.* 15. Each year, at least 30% of students in grades 5-12 will be engaged in volunteer community service. *Data Collection: A student survey and a survey of major service agencies in the community.* 16. Each year, at least 75% of the district's students will have a family member who has participated in a meaningful class or home learning activity during the school year. *Data Collection: Asking family members to complete a form to be turned in to the teacher after completing the activity. The principal will count the number of forms returned per student.* 17. Within two years, the district will have documentation of at least 25 active, curriculum-related partnerships between schools and local businesses. *Data Collection: Data will be collected by the guidance team.* 18. Each year, materials, people, or facilities from each social service agency and each non-profit cultural or service organization located in the district will be the basis of at least one student or teacher learning experience. *Data Collection: Surveying teachers.*

Indicator Development Activities:

Evaluating Your Performance Indicators

After you have developed your performance indicators, use this tool to analyze the quality of each individually.

Step 1: Write one of your performance results indicators in the space below.

Step 2: Answer these questions about the indicator.

Which goal(s) does the indicator measure?

What are the baseline data points for this indicator?

What is the source of the data that will be used to measure progress against this indicator?

What procedures will be followed for collecting the data?

How will data be displayed?

How can we ensure that this indicator is measured consistently and accurately?

How will progress toward this indicator be reported throughout the district? How often?

Step 3: Ask one or more people outside the planning team to answer the questions below. You can use their responses as you refine the performance indicators.

If this indicator were to be met, would you consider that as evidence of progress toward the goal(s) associated with it?

Do you see any potential problems with using this indicator? If so, do you see any way to overcome them?

What does this indicator say is to be seen, counted, or measured?

Will you be interested in knowing how the district is doing in meeting this indicator? Why?

Does the indicator sound challenging enough? If not, why not?

Do you think your building-level team will be able to set more specific indicators based on this one? Jot down any rough ideas you may have for building-level indicators based on this indicator.

Is it realistic? If not, why not?

Determine Strategies

Strategies describe the major ongoing actions that will enable the district to achieve the levels of performance cited in its indicators. District-level strategies should be broad and flexible.

Question

What factors help ensure the success of a strategy?

Relevance: *Stakeholders see a need for the strategy, understand the change, and recognize its utility.*

Readiness: *The people involved find the strategy reasonable. They have the time, knowledge, skill and culture to implement it.*

Resources: *The district has the resources to support the strategy.*

Adapted from Michael G. Fullan's The Meaning of Educational Change

Strategy development is a turning point in the continuous improvement planning process. It is the bridge between the vision with its picture of a desired future and a detailed plan describing the specific actions needed to get there. *Strategy development is a time for outlining a few "master" activities that will direct how the district's time and resources are expended.*

Strategy development also is a time for reaching out to stakeholders for ideas and tapping into their expertise. The core planning team should consider creating additional teams of knowledgeable and interested stakeholders to generate possible strategies for each performance results indicator or for sets of related indicators. These teams also could lead brainstorming sessions that include all interested stakeholders.

Determining district improvement strategies involves making major decisions about the structures, processes, programs, projects, relationships, and resources of a district. The district-level strategies will enable individual schools to leverage resources as they develop their building-level plans.

Strategy development may involve:

- Creating a new course of action
- Increasing support for a course of action that shows promise
- Redesigning a course of action that is not achieving desired results
- Eliminating or reducing support for a course of action with limited value.

Strategy development is the crucial time for developing a critical mass of support for the plan. It also is a time when some stakeholders will become sharply aware that established patterns are going to change. The planning team and district leaders should be ready to address resistance and conflict, as well as disagreements about which strategies are best.

The Foundation of the Strategies

Developing strategies is a process of creatively building upon the foundation already established during earlier stages of planning.

Performance Results Indicators. The strategies will begin the process of defining how to meet the district's performance results indicators. The indicators represent the results that will be seen as the strategies are successfully enacted. Although strategies describe how to achieve the district's performance results indicators, it is not necessary to develop one strategy devoted exclusively to each indicator. In fact, this can create a fragmented approach. Most strategies should support multiple performance results indicators.

Goals and Mission. The strategies will be the major ongoing actions that will lead to achievement of the district's goals and fulfillment of its mission.

Strengths and Needs. The strategies will be the tangible, ongoing actions taken in recognition of the district's strengths and needs. Strategies will determine how the district protects and maximizes its assets, overcomes its weaknesses, solves its problems, takes advantage of predicted opportunities, and confronts recognized obstacles.

District-wide strategies should:

Improve education in the district as a whole.

Require broad participation in order to succeed.

Be applicable in different settings.

Complement, not contradict, one another.

District-Level Strategies

To prevent the planning process from splitting off into different strategy groups with special interests, the planning team should make a careful distinction between district-level strategies and building-level strategies.

A district-level strategy must influence education throughout the district and have significant impacts. It must be flexible enough to enable different buildings, disciplines, administrative functions, and stakeholder groups to choose activities appropriate to their setting, the groups they serve, their strengths, and their needs.

A district-wide strategy also requires participation from people in different groups throughout the district. Some strategies might require a number of groups to engage in extensive interaction and collaborate on a small number of large-scale activities. In other cases, strategies might require a number of varied activities, each geared to the needs, expertise, and resources of a different group.

Although each building in a district may differ in its emphases, individual building-level plans should not follow a direction that is opposed to the strategies in the district plan. However, the data and ideas emerging from individual buildings—whether the results of building-level improvement planning or involvement in district-level planning—should be a major force in shaping the district-level plan.

Process Indicators for Strategies

In some cases a planning team may want to develop a set of process indicators for documenting the district's progress in implementing its strategies. While performance results indicators are based on goals and help to assess the long-term results of the continuous improvement plan, process indicators that are based on strategies would help the planning team to determine, in the interim, whether the strategies are being carried out as planned. Process indicators would, for example, describe the degree of participation in programs, the extent to which practices are used, and the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of processes.

One advantage of using process indicators consistently is the assurance that strategies will be thoroughly tested. When a strategy fails, it may be a faulty strategy. But often, a strategy fails because it is not implemented fully and correctly. Process indicators help districts not only to identify faulty strategies, but also to avoid the false assumption that a potentially effective strategy is not working and needs to be abandoned.

Process indicators also help avoid unnecessary conflict. Those who refuse to abandon failed strategies and those who attack innovative strategies would be required to justify their cases against objective data.

Process Tip

Consider Consolidated Local Planning

Districts should consider completing Consolidated Local Plans (CLP) for their federal funds. A CLP enables a district to integrate its federal funds more effectively.

Many of the elements in a continuous improvement plan also are found in a CLP. Therefore, a district with a continuous improvement plan will find it much easier to complete a CLP.

Identifying Resources

Planning teams should consider developing strategies without focusing too much on the cost. Sometimes, a good idea will create such excitement and commitment that it will totally change people's thinking about how resources should be allocated, or its uniqueness will make it eligible for additional funding.

However, the strategy development phase is a good time for the planning team to review all the resources that are available.

Time

Some strategies will need teachers and other staff to commit time in addition to their usual work. Other strategies, although carried out during existing teaching and learning time, may require key staff members to spend additional hours in training, meetings, and data collection. Therefore, the team should determine whether additional amounts of staff time can be arranged and whether schedules may need to be shifted.

Financial Resources

The planning team should look at the total amount of funding that will be available to the district during implementation of the continuous improvement plan. Although district budgets are certain to contain fixed, non-negotiable expenses, the team should be instructed to consider all discretionary funding as potential resources for implementing the plan.

Although federal, state, and local laws and regulations may require separate accounting for certain grants and tax revenues, all financial resources should be viewed as possible funding sources for the activities outlined in the plan.

Planning teams should know that there are possibilities for dividing funds from one federal or state grant among several different improvement activities, as well as for funding a major activity with monies from a number of grants.

Facilities and Equipment

Planning teams will need to determine whether any strategies require specific facilities, equipment, and materials that might be limited in availability and whether purchasing, leasiong, or otherwise obtaining any new facilities, materials, and equipment might be required.

Community Support

Although not as tangible as dollars, community support should be considered a resource. Planning teams should explore what family, business, or community groups might be able to provide time, expertise, or other resources.

Strategy Development Activity

Generating and Evaluating Strategies

A good way to begin developing district-level strategies that address your performance results indicators, goals, and needs is to create small brainstorming groups consisting of team members and representatives from key stakeholder groups.

Step 1: Brainstorming

Brainstorming involves generating as many ideas as possible without evaluating them. Here are three approaches to brainstorming for groups to try:

Free flow. Everyone voices ideas as they occur and someone records them.

Round Robin. Participants voice their ideas sequentially but have the option to pass. Again, someone records the ideas.

Idea Writing. Within a brief period, participants silently write as many ideas as they can. Then participants read their ideas aloud.

Step 2: Discussion

After all the possible strategies are presented, each group should select its three most promising ones and discuss these ideas in preparation for presenting them to the whole group. One way to maximize input is to conduct a PINS analysis. This means that each person must say what they find Positive, Interesting, and Negative about each strategy, then offer a Suggestion for improving it. The small groups can write the results of the large group's PINS analysis below for use in making further revisions.

Strategy:

Positive _____

Interesting _____

Negative _____

Suggestion _____

Strategy:

Positive _____

Interesting _____

Negative _____

Suggestion _____

Strategy:

Positive _____

Interesting _____

Negative _____

Suggestion _____

Step 3: Selection of Promising Strategies

The small groups should use the comments generated during the PINS analysis to select and refine the strategies they will propose to the larger group. If they are having trouble reaching a decision, they may want to to try the multi-voting technique discussed on Page 51.

In evaluating each strategy, consider the following questions:

How well does the strategy address specific performance results indicators?

Is the strategy clear, realistic, timely, and important?

Does the strategy contain any elements that should be eliminated, intensified, or restated? Should anything be added to the strategy?

Step 4: Presentation of Best Ideas

Each group should have an opportunity to make a case for the strategies they have selected.

The tools for evaluating strategies that appear on pages 75 and 76 can be used in preparing this presentation. The tool also can be used by the whole group to evaluate the strategies as they are presented.

Step 5: Analysis of Proposed Strategies

Each group should present the strategies they chose for discussion. The PINS analysis can be used again for a whole group, or the facilitator may want to use the evaluation tool on page 75. This tool can be completed by individuals and then discussed in a whole group session.

In this session, the facilitator could reproduce the tool on a whiteboard or flip chart and ask each participant to place a sticky dot at the appropriate point on the lines.

Another option would be to use the force field diagram on page 76 as a discussion tool for each strategy.

Step 6: Selection of Strategies for Continuous Improvement

After careful analysis, the planning team should select strategies that are most likely to create the results described by the performance results indicators.

The primary factor that should be used in selecting a strategy is its relevance to the desired results. A good reality check before making a final decision is to present the strategy to different audiences in the following way:

Our district is going to:
(State the strategy clearly and concisely.)

If we do this, do you believe the result will be:
(State the performance results indicator.)

Step 7: Consider Costs

After selecting the strategies, the team should begin to consider what resources will be needed for each strategy and what resources are available. Before abandoning a strategy as too costly, they should consider alternative ways to use resources or ways to cut the cost of the strategy without affecting its success.

Step 8: Creation of Process Indicators

Process indicators can be used to ensure that strategies are being carried out efficiently and effectively. Process indicators can be developed using the worksheets for performance results indicators on pages 66-68, as well as the data collection and analysis worksheets on pages 39-43.

Th only difference between performance results indicators and process indicators is what is measured: performance results indicators measure the effects of a strategy while process indicators measure the quality of the actions leading to those results.

Resource Identification Worksheet

Funds Available for Continuous Improvement Strategies

Continuous improvement is a process of replacing what doesn't work and strengthening what does. Therefore, districts can and should apply all discretionary funding to their improvement strategies. District leaders and the planning team can use this worksheet to identify available funding.

Funding Sources

District Budget _____

Community Resources

Grants from local businesses _____

Proceeds from community fundraising _____

Proceeds from student and staff fund-raising _____

Federal Entitlement Grants:

Title I (Chapter I) _____

Title II (Eisenhower) _____

Title IV (Safe and Drug Free) _____

Title VI (Chapter 2) _____

Title VIB (Special Education) _____

School-To-Work _____

Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education and Applied Technology _____

Tech Prep _____

State Entitlement Grants:

Local Professional Development Block Grants _____

Federal Competitive Grants:

Title III (Goals 2000) _____

Title II (Eisenhower through the Board of Regents) _____

Even Start _____

State Competitive Grants:

Regional Professional Development Centers _____

Urban Professional Development Centers _____

Teacher Recruitment _____

Venture Capital _____

Peer Review _____

Entry Year Program _____

Reading Improvement _____

School Age Care _____

Public School Preschool _____

Head Start _____

Family and School Partnership _____

School Conflict Management _____

DPIA Reading Improvement _____

Financial Literacy _____

Foundation Grants _____

Strategy Evaluation Activity

Benefits Vs. Investment

After you have developed your strategies, use this tool to help choose the ones that will be included in the plan. For each strategy, color in the line on the scale that appears to the left of each item (1 = [illegible] 10 = greatest).

If the first two lines are longer than most of the other lines, the strategy should be strongly consider[illegible]

Strategy:

Degree of positive change resulting from the strategy?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Possibility of external funding for the strategy

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Time invested in the strategy?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Costs associated with the strategy?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Difficulty of the strategy?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Major risks with the strategy?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Controversy associated with the strategy?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strategy Evaluation Activity

Creating a Force Field Diagram

A force field diagram can be used to weigh the positive and negative points for adopting a strategy.

Strategy:

Forces driving us toward the strategy	*Forces driving us away from the strategy*

Some Sample Strategies and Process Indicators

Strategy: We will create and implement a research-based, comprehensive reading intervention program.

Possible Resources: Parent volunteers, fourth-year education students (available through a partnership with our local university), Title I for eligible students, Title VIB when applicable, Even Start grant, Reading Improvement grant.

Process Indicators: Within one year, 80% of Head Start and K-4 teachers, 50% of middle school teachers, and 25% of high school teachers will be involved in at least one regular intervention activity related to improving students' reading skills. Within two years, representatives from at least 50% of the district's local private pre-schools and at least 200 parents will be involved in the activities.

Strategy: We will develop a comprehensive, integrated, student-focused PK-12 curriculum and introduce it into practice.

Possible Resources: District budget, Goals 2000 grant, Professional Development Block grant, Eisenhower, School-To-Work.

Process Indicators: Within one year, every building will display at all times a variety of student projects.

Every academic and vocational course will increase by 10% per year the number of learning activities that involve hands on learning, cooperative learning, field work, experimentation, simulation, or other forms of applied learning.

A trained observer will be able to see at least three ways that each building has used its physical space to support learning.

Strategy: We will work with local industry, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations to organize career exploration and planning programs for each age group from K-12.

Possible Resources: School-To-Work, Carl D. Perkins, grants from businesses.

Process Indicators: Within two years, all teachers will have established relationships with at least one individual or group associated with a business, a college or university, a non-profit organization, or a government agency for the purpose of gaining knowledge about employment options and required skills in a high demand career field.

Each year, the district will document at least 100 meaningful interactions between people in professional fields or skilled trades and students at each grade level. (An activity involving an entire class counts as one interaction.)

Strategy: The district will set aside a special pool of release time and funds for supporting innovative professional development activities that will contribute to the success of the district's goals.

Possible Resources: Release time, Professional Development Block Grants

Process Indicators: At least 25% of the district's teachers will submit proposals. At least 75% of the district's teachers will express some agreement or strong agreement that the selected uses of funding and release time has been beneficial to students and teachers.

Strategy: We will create a district-wide, community-supported enrichment program that helps students develop their assets, make mature decisions about violence and alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and obtain needed guidance from caring teachers, family members, business people, and community members.

Possible Resources: Title IV, Title I and VIB when applicable, parent and community volunteers, foundation grant

Process Indicators: At least 50 teachers per year will complete 24 hours or more of coursework in asset development strategies until all teachers have completed the coursework. *Data will be obtained from professional development plans.*

Each year, at least 100 parents of students with risk factors in their backgrounds will attend eight hours of asset development training. *Data will be obtained from sign in sheets circulated at each session.*

Within three years, at least 10 of the 12 youth-related service agencies in our community will be active partners in the program.

Within three years, the number of at risk students in our district who have regular contact with adult mentors or counselors will increase by 200%. *Data will be obtained from written lists provided by each principal, guidance counselor, or other building representative and by surveying mentors, students, and their parents.*

Strategy: We will increase the role of our district-wide e-mail system and our Web-based intranet in problem-solving and decision-making processes, particularly in the development of the new curriculum and assessment tools.

Possible Resources: SchoolNet, district budget, business volunteers, students

Process Indicators: Within one year, each student and teacher will have access to and training in electronic mail and use of our district's Web-based intranet. *Data will be obtained from professional development plans and by having the technology coordinator provide statistics on the average number of logins per week to the e-mail system and the total number of postings to the intranet.*

Within two years, each teacher will be able to locate online information related to the district's new K-12 curriculum. *The technology coordinator will obtain these data by discreetly asking a random sample of teachers to demonstrate their ability to access the information.*

At least twice a year, each principal will use the district's internal Web page to moderate at least two online conferences among staff, students, and parents related to the new curriculum. *Data will be obtained by having the technology coordinator provide a log of postings to the district's internal Web page.*

Strategy: We will change the focus of our family involvement program. Its new purpose will be to determine how family members, business people, and community members can participate in each of the district's new improvement strategies and to create a diverse array of volunteer opportunities that will contribute to the success of the strategies.

Possible Resources: Family and School Partnerships, Title IV

Process Indicator: Students, students' family members, business people, and community members will lead at least 25% of the district's improvement strategies.

Develop Action Plan

Developing an action plan is a process of designing the tasks required for implementing each strategy. It includes assigning responsibility for each task, determining costs, allocating resources, and establishing start and completion dates.

The district-wide strategies are certain to create many questions: What are the first steps? How much time and how many people will be required to carry out this strategy successfully? How much will these programs or projects cost and where will we get the needed funds?

Those questions are answered in the action plan.

The action plan is a description of the tasks that must be performed, the responsibilities that must be assigned, the resources that must be allocated, and the schedules that must be met in order to implement each strategy.

Expanding the Planning Team

The action planning stage of continuous improvement planning completes the leadership transition that started during strategy development. Previously, the planning team was at the center of each activity with stakeholders offering suggestions and stating views. *Action planning is the time to pinpoint who does what by when.* In other words, it is the time to begin distributing leadership of some activities across the district.

As action planning begins, the district should identify staff members—as well as students, their family members, and community members—who are most critical to achieving the district's strategies. At some point, these key individuals will become members of teams with assigned tasks, and they will create their own task-specific plans.

It is crucial, therefore, that the planning team identifies people who can get things done without close supervision and work effectively as team members. But it is also essential that they create teams that represent the composition of the district.

Identify Major Tasks

A major task is a set of specific actions that will be performed in order to implement a strategy. A task may be a project that has a defined end point or a process that is designed, put in place, and repeated on a consistent basis. Sometimes the objective of a project is to design a process. In either case, a task produces results that can be measured.

District-wide action planning begins by determining what major tasks are appropriate for each strategy. These major tasks are then divided into smaller tasks that are completed in a sequence by the same team or in parallel by different teams.

For each major task, these questions should be answered:

- What strategy does this task support?
- What specific results will this task deliver? What process indicators will we use to determine whether the task has achieved its purpose? Do we need additional process indicators or milestones?
- Who is responsible for completing the task? What communication links should be established among task owners and with other groups?
- When will the task be started? Do other tasks need to be completed before this task can be started?
- When will the task be completed?
- What are the steps or sub-tasks involved in this task?
- For each sub-task, who is responsible, what will the results be, and what are the start and end dates? In what sequence should these sub-tasks be performed? How are these sub-tasks connected to one another?

A common question about this process concerns how detailed a planning team should get in defining tasks and sub-tasks. In general, the planning team should define each major task, working together with those responsible for its completion. The task owners should then complete the process of defining the sub-tasks.

Analyze Costs

The next step is estimating the cost of each major task.

This includes financial costs, as well as the time of staff, students' family members, and business people, use of existing facilities and equipment, and use of community resources.

Action planning teams should estimate the total and annual costs in these and other categories. It is important to think about how it might be possible to reduce costs or share costs among tasks.

Also, action planning teams should outline the potential cost savings and returns on investment each task will bring. Many expensive tasks may be more cost-effective than they seem because they eliminate waste and inefficiency.

Costs associated with a task may include:

Training

Salaries and benefits for additional district personnel

Pay for substitute teachers

Meeting costs

Fees for peripheral services

Special materials or equipment

Rental fees for special facilities

Travel and accommodations

Incentive grants or stipends for certain contributions

Membership fees and other reimbursable expenses

Finally, teams should think about whether a task has the potential to pay for itself. For example, if a task is to design and implement an extracurricular activity, it may be appropriate to defray some costs by charging fees. (Asking parents for their opinion on the fees is a good idea.)

Now that costs have been analyzed for each task, the next step is to prepare for making decisions about how resources will be allocated by determining the benefits of each task. The planning team should evaluate each task beginning with the following questions:

- What strategies were assigned the highest priority?
- Which tasks support those strategies? Which tasks are critical?
- What are the total costs of the critical tasks? If a task extends beyond one school year, what are the yearly costs? What are the total and yearly costs minus the cost savings and other returns?
- What are the costs of the non-critical tasks that support high priority strategies?

Next, the team should look at the tasks supporting the remaining strategies:

- Which tasks support each of the other strategies?
- What are the total costs of those tasks? What are the total costs minus the cost savings and other returns?

Allocate Resources

Now the team should examine the resources identified earlier and compare them to the total cost of all the tasks. This will determine the size of the gap between costs and resources.

This point in the process is the ideal time to create the district's Consolidated Local Plan (CLP) for the coming year. Integrating the CLP with the resource allocation phase of continuous improvement planning ensures that federal entitlement funds are used to support the strategies in the continuous improvement plan.

The team may want to allocate funds in this order:

1] Determine which strategies and tasks in the continuous improvement plan meet federal guidelines for programmatic funds. Allocate entitlement funds to those strategies. If available entitlement funds do not match the continuous improvement strategies, consider asking for a waiver.

2] Match other funding sources with related strategies and tasks.

3] Begin matching discretionary funds to the strategies that remain.

If a gap exists between available resources and the cost of the remaining strategies and tasks, the team should examine whether the district is committing resources to discretionary activities that are not part of the plan. If that is the case, they should shift resources from those activities to the strategies in the plan. (Of course, they must observe all existing legal and regulatory guidelines in doing so.) *The guiding principle in allocating resources should be that the strategies outlined in the continuous improvement plan take precedence over any discretionary activities not outlined in the plan.*

If a gap still remains, the team needs to explore these options:

- Which tasks can be eliminated or scaled down without jeopardizing a strategy?
- Which tasks can be redesigned for greater cost-effectiveness?
- Which tasks can be combined or leveraged to share resources and returns?
- Which tasks can be postponed until new funds are available? What can be done to obtain future funds?
- Which tasks can be funded through alternative funding sources? How can those funds be obtained?

Process Tip

Think Outside the Box

Planning teams need to "think outside the box" when they allocate resources. Consider the following questions:

Are we declaring some resources "off limits" because they have always been allocated to pet projects and activities that do not support our strategies?

Are we underestimating the time investment of key individuals? Can we relieve them of duties that don't support the plan?

Are we assuming unnecessarily that facilities or equipment can be used for only one purpose? Or that people are capable of fulfilling only one role?

Are we thinking only of the same outside groups who have always contributed to our efforts and ignoring more unconventional partners who may have something unique to offer?

Have we overlooked new technologies that enable new and better ways to perform tasks?

Examples of Major Stages in Different Types of Tasks

Plan-Analyze-Do

Design-Test-Evaluate

Research-Select Equipment - Install-Train

Inform Public-Discuss–Decide

Develop a Timeline

The action plan for each task should include a timeline that provides deadlines for critical activities that will occur during each phase of the task.

The task should be divided only into major phases that end with the achievement of interim objectives or results. It is likely that the teams assigned to asks during action planning will create more detailed timelines in the future.

Develop Evaluation Procedures

When members of a school district commit to continuous improvement as a way of life, they are committing to continuous planning. In other words, a continuous improvement plan is never really finished. If it works well, new needs are identified and new, more challenging goals and indicators are set. If it doesn't work well, better strategies and action plans are developed. Either way, the plan continues to evolve.

For this reason, the last part of the continuing cycle of continuous improvement planning is creating evaluation procedures—methods for determining how the planning team and the district's stakeholders will know whether their strategies and action plans are working.

Suggestions for creating evaluation procedures include:

- Create a system for consistently gathering performance data and measuring progress against the performance results indicators and the process indicators. Assign responsibility for overall data collection and tracking of results to specific individuals.
- Create separate indicators that measure the impact of the plan. For example: *In six months, every principal will be able to state the district's goals from memory.* Or *Every task outlined in the action plan will be completed on time and on budget.*
- Develop one or more opinion surveys that will be sent to stakeholders at regular intervals.
- Create a schedule of community forums to gather feedback on how the plan is working.
- Schedule one or more independent performance audits to occur at least a year after the plan is in place.
- Ask a critical friend to make unannounced visits to observe whether strategies are visible.

Action Plan

Need _____

_____

_____

Goal _____

_____

_____

Performance Indicator _____

_____

_____

_____

Evaluation Process _____

_____

_____

_____

Strategy _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Responsibilities (Who will do it?)

3. Resources (How will we support it?)

1. Tasks (What will be done?)

4. Timeline (By when?)

Sample Action Plan for One Task

Need Students need more exposure to career options. Also, we need to extend the benefits of the excellent career planning program developed by our middle schools.

Goal All students will be continually engaged in projects that are closely linked to their current learning needs; that demand creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; **and that expose them to a variety of educational and vocational paths.**

Performance Indicators Each year, students in grades 7-12 will successfully complete at least one independent, interdisciplinary project.

Within five years, at least 90% of students in grades 8-12 will have an up-to-date, well-formulated career and higher education plan and a portfolio of work related to their plan.

Evaluation Process A panel of teachers and partners in higher education, business, and the community will assess each project according to rigorous criteria.

Strategy We will work with local industry, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations to organize career exploration and planning programs for each age group from K-12.

1. Major Tasks (What will be done?)

1. Increase community awareness of the strategy.
2. Develop instruments for assessing student interests at different grade levels.
3. Work with higher education and business partners to develop career exploration activities that are aligned with the core academic curriculum.
4. Select students and community partners to work on pilot projects.
5. Design assessments for interdisciplinary projects.

2. Responsibilities (Who will do it?)

1. Business, graphic arts, and journalism teachers at the high school and vocational school will lead.
2. A team of K-12 teachers and guidance counselors will work with business and higher education partners.
3. A team of principals and guidance personnel will lead.
4. Business and higher education partners from different areas and the local PTA will lead.
5. A team of teachers will work with an assessment specialist.

3. Resources (How will we support it?)

1. $x from district operating funds.
2. $x from School To Work.
3. $x from School To Work. $x from Carl D. Perkins Grant.
4. Materials and time donated by business and community groups and parents.
5. $x from the Local Professional Development Block Grant will be set aside for training. The district will provide $x and a foundation will provide matching funds.

4. Timeline (By when?)

1. Two months after adoption of plan.
2. Five months after adoption of plan.
3. Ongoing. Ten activities will be in place six months after adoption of plan.
4. Selection already under way. Projects complete by end of this school year.
5. Prototype due six months after adoption of plan. Final version, one year after adoption of plan.

Part IV

Implementation

When a district completes its first major cycle of strategic decision-making, it is time to write a plan and present it to the entire community for approval. Once the community has approved the plan, implementation begins.

Implementation means putting the plan into practice fully by carrying out the tasks identified for each strategy, collecting data, measuring progress against indicators, and implementing evaluation procedures so that the plan may be revised if necessary.

The major steps that will occur at this time include:

- √ Writing and communicating the plan
- √ Adopting the plan
- √ Implementing the plan
- √ Evaluating and revising the plan.

After following the recommendations in this section, districts will have:

- A written plan that has been communicated effectively to the entire community
- Consensus in the community that the plan will be fully implemented
- A process in place for assuring that the plan is being carried out efficiently and effectively, that the district is making progress toward its goals, and that the plan will continue to evolve over the next three years and beyond.

Write and Implement the Plan

A school district should begin implementing its continuous improvement plan immediately. Full implementation can take one to three years. A clear, concise, well-organized written plan helps the district communicate its decisions effectively and stay on track.

During the writing and implemention of the plan, the planning team should be focused on two objectives:

- Capturing all the good ideas that emerged in the planning process in a way that will inspire support from stakeholders who have not yet participated.
- Ensuring that stakeholders carry out the plan.

Write the Plan

Some districts prefer designating a single writer who will generate successive drafts for review by key people. Others divide the task among several writers.

Assemble and review material already drafted. When the planning team is ready to write a formal plan, most of the important writing will be done. The planning team should be sure to use the needs, goals, indicators, and strategies they generated during the panning process. These form the basis of the plan.

Agree on length and format. Of course, continuous improvementplans should be clear, concise, and logically organized so they can be easily used. But no perfect length or format exists. A time-saving step is to agree on the content and length of each majorsection before writing begins. This is especially important whenmore than one person is writing.

Outline, Draft, and Revise. Beginning with a draft of the executive summary and an outline will give the writer(s) a framework. From hese sources, the writer or writing team should generate a first daft and distribute it for review. Before the final version is competed, the plan should be reviewed by all planning team members and others who played a decisive role in the planning proces, key decision-makers, and individuals from each stakeholdergroup. It is a good idea to select some reviewers who are unfamiliar with the plan and the district's operations to see if the document will be understandable to the public.

Process Tip

Questions for Reviewers

What is your overall reaction to the plan?

What specifically do you like about the major sections of the plan?

Has anything important been left unaddressed?

Is there anything in the plan that is hard to understand?

Do you have concerns about any sections or points in the plan? Are your concerns directed at what is said or how it is said?

Is there anything in the plan that will be pinpointed for public criticism? If so how can the criticism be avoided or addressed?

What are your suggestions for strengthening the plan?

Adopt and Publish the Plan

When the plan has been written, reviewed, and revised, it should be formally adopted by the district's major decision-making bodies.

The planning team should give everyone in the district an opportunity to review the plan. Since the plan is certain to be several pages in length, they may want to distribute a one- or two-page synopsis that includes a phone number to call for those who want to read the complete plan. Attaching a postcard for indicating approval also may be useful.

A district may choose to hold a signing ceremony or other event to celebrate adoption. At this time copies or summaries of the plan should be made widely available and the local press should be informed through press releases and interviews with district representatives.

During the period immediately following adoption, staff should be prepared to give presentations and to discuss the plan with anyone who is interested.

Idea

The plan should include a list of planning team members and their titles or roles so that stakeholders will know that they have been represented in the process.

It might also be a good idea to include a list of all the people who participated in planning sessions or provided needed support.

Begin Following the Plan

A district should begin using its continuous improvement plan as soon the plan has been formally adopted. In many cases, plans must be phased in because of old commitments and the need to complete outstanding tasks. However, a district should try to implement its plan fully within the shortest time possible.

Implementation will get off to a smooth start when the following conditions are present:

- Stakeholders understand the plan and major objections have been addressed.
- Training required for initial activities is underway or complete. Job descriptions have been revised to align with the plan.
- All policies, procedures, schedules, rules, and regulations that could hinder implementation have been eliminated.
- Major action plans are complete. Everyone knows, understands, and accepts what needs to be done, when, and by whom. Everyone knows the important first steps and what will be done at each phase of implementation.
- Each building and unit is ready to support the action plan and carry out its part in the tasks outlined.
- Resources identified and allocated in the planning process have been made available for use.
- Evaluation procedures are in place and the first major review is scheduled.

Marketing the Improvement Initiative

Every organization, whether a business, a hospital, or a school district, should develop strategies for marketing what it has to offer.

Marketing school improvement does not mean creating a high-powered image by printing glossy brochures, making videos, or designing ad campaigns. It does not mean deceiving or manipulating the public. This misconception about "marketing" often prevents districts from sharing true success stories and important information.

School districts that are working to improve *should* make a practice of interacting with the news media about their successes. It is a way to recognize the people who worked hard and to inspire others. And it is a way to educate the media about some of the educational issues they often miss.

Districts that are working to improve should keep stakeholders informed and help them increase their knowledge of educational issues—not only local, but also state and national. They can do this through local newspapers and broadcast news, as well as through new media, such as electronic mail, World-Wide Web pages, community access cable television, and telephone hotlines.

Effective marketing also means forging ongoing relationships between those who can benefit from the school district's services and those who provide them. It means inviting the public to meetings in the schools, but it also means going out into the community—making the schools a force in every aspect of community life, just as parents, members of the business community, and citizens became part of the school district's life during the planning sessions. It means responding to complaints and problems instead of hoping they will go away by themselves. And it means looking for emerging problems and dealing with them before the community calls for action.

Districts that have engaged in continuous improvement planning have an excellent start in forging these relationships with their communities. They should be sure to nurture those relationships.

Three Marketing Principles for School Districts:

Sensitivity: *Develop multiple communication modes and channels for reading the environment.*

Flexibility: *Become an organization that can respond quickly to feedback.*

Resiliency: *Learn from mistakes.*

Based on ideas from marketing expert Regis McKenna's concept of "adaptive marketing."

Some Ideas for Marketing School District Improvement Initiatives

List ten people from local businesses and the community who can offer insightful comments about the school district's problems and goals.

Choose people who are in touch with public opinion, particularly those who know the views of parents. Assign one administrator to talk with each of these people every three months. Then share the insights gained with one another.

Recognizing individual parents, businesses, and community members who participate in planning and implementation is an excellent marketing technique.

What are some books or magazine articles on educational reform, parenting and family life, education policy, or other relevant issues that you wish every parent would read?

Think about obtaining copies of these materials and offering them to parents. Then schedule book discussions at different times during the year. These discussions may give you some insights about parents' concerns and hopes, and they will lessen misunderstandings about issues.

Consider: Everyone who works for the school district is "in marketing."

A teacher who makes home visits or calls parents to compliment good students, a school secretary who is friendly and helpful when parents call, and a maintenance worker who keeps the grounds and buildings clean and well-repaired play as important a role in marketing the school district as a glossy newsletter or the superintendent's speeches.

Ask everyone on staff to think about three things they can do to market the school district's continuous improvement plan.

Consider: Are there other settings where district personnel can engage parents and community members in dialogue about continuous improvement?

Some people who would feel uncomfortable at a formal meeting would open up in a setting where they were having a meal or working side by side with others.

Perhaps administrators or planning team members could visit with parents who are waiting for their children to finish play practice or athletics. Engage them in conversation, give them a few highlights on how the improvement process is progressing, and then ask them their thoughts.

Students can help you gather market "intelligence" for use in improvement planning.

Occasionally, give students information about improvement initiatives in their school and ask them to discuss the information with their parents and neighbors. Then spend some time listening to what students say about the discussions.

Gather Data and Evaluate Results

Continuous improvement planning is a cycle. After a plan has been published, a new phase of data collection and needs analysis begins—this time based on the plan's indicators.

"To keep progressing, we must learn, commit, and do—learn, commit, and do—and learn, commit, and do again."

Stephen R. Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

Question

How does a district know its plan has been fully implemented?

Signs of full implementation may include:

Administrators refer to the plan daily. They discuss aspects of the plan at important meetings.

Teachers and administrators, as well as school board members and community leaders, usually cite the plan as the basis for their decisions and actions.

Gathering data and using indicators to measure results are routine activities.

District and building budgets and expenditures reflect the strategies and tasks outlined in the plan.

Staff are commonly rewarded for actions that aid implementation of the plan.

In school districts where continuous improvement is a way of life, adopting and implementing a plan does not mean that the planning process is over. Plans must be evaluated continually using data-based decision-making. If all indicators are being met, the district should be examining what new strengths and opportunities are emerging from this success. If indicators are not being met, the district should determine whether action plans are being implemented and evaluate its strategies.

Collecting Data

Everyone in the district should gather data continually to use in measuring progress toward the performance indicators outlined in the plan. Indicator data should be updated regularly and displayed in prominent locations. Buildings should use data to analyze problems and make decisions.

Monthly Review of Action Plan Status

Since the action plan will contain tasks that are to be completed in the short term, the district planning team (or other leaders) should keep a master list of all tasks and hold monthly reviews to assess progress. Everyone responsible for completing tasks should be present at these meetings, as well as the superintendent or other central office staff. Also, representatives from different stakeholder groups should be invited.

Question
What if implementation seems to be weak?
Are policies and procedures still in place that make it difficult to implement the plan?
Are stakeholders encountering strong disincentives for following the plan? Are those who follow the plan being recognized?
Are rigid schedules and roles reducing available time for activities in the plan?
Have resources been allocated as outlined in the plan?
Is misinformation, misinterpretation, or lack of awareness impeding the plan?
Do the plan's critics have opportunities to voice concerns? Are their concerns addressed?
Are district leaders–official and unofficial–demonstrating commitment to the plan?
Are data being collected and analyzed regularly, efficiently, and correctly?.
Is progress being reviewed often enough? Do leaders seem serious about the need to meet planned deadlines and requirements?
Have unforeseen crises or opportunities weakened the strategies in the plan?
Are people having difficulty interpreting and applying the goals, indicators, or strategies in day-to-day situations?
Are data collection procedures and indicators too hard to use?
Are strategies flexible enough to be carried out in every setting?

Questions to answer at these monthly reviews include:

- How is the whole system doing in the view of staff, students, students' family members, business and industry, and the community? What are some successes that should be recognized?
- What do the data show? Is the district making significant progress toward its indicators? Should additional data collection activities be started?
- Have any new issues or problems emerged? Will they require new action plans? Might they require future changes in strategies and indicators?
- What tasks have been completed during the past month? Were the desired results achieved? Have the follow-up tasks been started?
- What tasks were scheduled to be completed but were not? Why? What can be done to get them back on track?
- What tasks will be due for completion in the next month?
- What new tasks must be undertaken?

Major Reviews

A district should conduct one or two major reviews during each school year to evaluate overall progress and update the plan if needed.

At these reviews, participants should:

- *Examine progress toward each indicator thoroughly.* If adequate progress is not being made, they should examine the data in depth for consistency and to determine whether any relevant trends or relationships can be seen.
- *Reassess needs using data and other observations.* They should ask whether the needs are still prioritized accurately and whether any new needs are emerging.
- *Review goals, indicators, and strategies to determine whether revisions are needed.*

Changing goals, indicators, and strategies is a decision to be weighed carefully. Planners should carefully revise if a goal, indicator, or strategy is found to be vague, ambiguous, or difficult to implement. However, they should not lower standards simply because people are resisting or not making an effort.

Final Thoughts

Those who have just finished using this guide to work through the stages of planning for the first time—and are now implementing their plans—have probably made some mistakes and learned many valuable lessons.

The beauty of continuous improvement planning is that one never has to say: "If I only had it to do all over again, I would...." It is always possible to apply lessons learned as the plan is evaluated and revised over the years.

As schools improve through effective continuous planning, the planning process itself also will improve. It may be difficult to believe when the first written plan is just being implemented, but districts that are willing to continue focusing their thoughts and efforts on effective planning will eventually notice that the planning process seems effortless and that it has become essential.

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